THE IMPORTANCE OF FIELD EXPERIENCE IN TEACHER PREPARATION: PERSPECTIVES OF TRAINEE ECONOMICS TEACHERS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

BERNARD YAW SEKYI ACQUAH, PETER ANTI PARTEY

Lecturer, Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana

Research Assistant, Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana

E-mail: bsacquah@gmail.com, peterparteyanti@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The emphasis of this study was to find out how trainee-teachers of Economics perceived off-campus teaching practice in terms of the benefits they derived from the exercise. The study employed a qualitative design with the use of interviews and focus group discussion as the main means for collecting data. A total number of 101 trainee-teachers, purposively selected, were involved in the focus group discussion and 20 trainee-teachers were interviewed. Data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis. It was revealed that trainee Economics teachers perceived field experience to be very important to them in terms of helping them develop professional proficiencies. Among such professional proficiencies cited by trainee-teachers included: the development of pedagogical skills and improvement in content knowledge; development of social skills; and acquisition of work experience.

Keywords: Field Experience, Work Experience, Perception, Trainee-teachers, Supervision.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for competent and well trained teachers, astute in both content knowledge and general pedagogical practices in their subject areas, is a very pertinent one if any nation is to succeed in developing the required human capital base to foster national development. This is because teachers are the main implementers of educational policies, organized into school programmes in the form of curriculum and syllabi. According to Eisner (as cited in Acquah, 2012, p. 29), the role of the teacher in curriculum implementation cannot be over emphasized. It is "the teacher" who "will have a general guide of topics in a subject field, a sequence among topics, a general set of aims, textbooks, and other instructional resources", to effectively organize and plan the curriculum to suit that level and background of the learner in the classroom. It is thus very important to ensure that the quality of teachers training institutions churn out year after year possess the professional competencies necessary for them to play their roles as teachers effectively.

Teacher training is thus considered a major priority in Ghana, with two public universities (The University of Cape Coast and The University of Education, Winneba), fully charged with the responsibility of meeting the nation's need for qualified teachers from the primary school level, through the junior and senior high school levels, and even to the tertiary level. In addition to these public universities, there are over 38 colleges of education mandated to train teachers mostly for the primary and junior high schools. Because this study focuses on the training of senior high school Economics teachers, emphasis is laid on teacher training at the University of Cape Coast as a case.

The focus of the study was on the training of Economics teachers for the senior high schools in Ghana, because Economics is considered a very important discipline that provides citizenship education for improved participation of the individual in matters bothering mostly on both the social and economic development of nations.
rationale for the study of Economics at the senior high school level in Ghana, as stated in the Teaching Syllabus for Economics (2008), suggests that people as well as countries have the need for more and better quality goods and services such as better food, clothing, housing, schooling, hospital care and entertainment (Ministry of Education Science and Sport, 2008). These goods and services can only be obtained by the use of resources such as Land, Labour, Capital and Entrepreneurship which are scarce relative to the demand for them, and which, therefore, need to be managed. Economics, indeed, is the study of the management of relatively scarce resources for satisfying the needs of individuals, organizations and countries.

As a practical subject, Economics helps to provide an effective framework for individuals, firms and governments to identify their basic economic problems, and make necessary decisions and policies for raising the living standards of people and societies. For such a positive vision to be realized there is the need for the training of adequate and quality Economics teachers. Hence the Bachelor of Education programme in the University of Cape Coast provides the opportunity for students who wish to teach Economics in the senior high school to major in the subject, and they are subsequently trained to become Economics teachers.

A mandatory requirement for the preparation of Economics teachers in the University of Cape Coast is active participation in a teaching field experience. This is an off-campus teaching exercise where students are required to practice the theories they have acquired in the classroom under the supervision of their lecturers and teachers on the field to further develop their teaching proficiencies. A casual observation and informal discussion with a cross-section of students seem to suggest that some appear not to fully appreciate the essence of the off-campus teaching practice. They appear to regard the exercise as just a requirement for graduation. Is this assertion true? If it is, then such trainee teachers are likely not to take the exercise seriously because it has been established that an individual's perceived benefit of a phenomenon is believed to influence the person's general attitude towards that particular phenomenon. For instance, studies have revealed that people's perceived benefit of gene technology influences their acceptance of such technology (Sparks, Shepherd & Frewer, 1994; Frewer, Howard, & Shepherd, 1995). In a similar vein, one cannot discount the possibility that trainee economics teachers' perception of the importance of field experience might influence their general attitude towards the exercise. A positive perception of the importance of field experience to trainee teachers is likely to influence the level of importance they would attach to the exercise and this might affect the general effectiveness of the exercise.

1.1 Importance of Field Experience in Teacher Preparation

Field experience constitutes a relatively small portion of the whole endeavour of Economics teacher preparation in the University of Cape Coast. Out of the mandatory minimum of 120 credit hours required for students to obtain a Bachelor of Education certificate, field experience accounts for only 12 credit hours. This notwithstanding, research has shown that many teachers consider their field-based experiences as the most important part of their education preparation programme (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). This could probably be attributed to the fact that unlike the regular semester courses, which require rigorous studies and constant preparation for quizzes and end-of-semester examinations, field experience tends to be more activity-based and affords students the opportunity to apply the various competencies acquired from the lecture room to a real world situation.

A critical analysis of literature suggests that the importance of field experience in teacher training programmes cannot be over-emphasized. It has been established overtime that one of the biggest influences within the pre-service teacher education course is the field-based experiences trainee-teachers encounter in real teaching situations (Farrell, 2001). This might probably be because it has been observed that field-based experiences offer trainee-teachers the opportunity to observe and work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings (Huling, 1997). It has been found to also help to offer training to pre-service teachers in the context in which they would be working after their training (Sleeter, 2008). Again research has revealed that some of the prospects of field experience, as indicated by the objectives of such exercises, included a diverse range of skills that were considered important for trainee-teachers to acquire. Some of such skills include: classroom management skills, lesson planning, awareness of teaching style, and ability to interact with students (Richards & Crooks, 1988).

The supervision, which occurs during field experience, also reflects theoretical and practical conditions and this has the tendency of building in trainee-teachers the requisite competencies for future professional practice. In addition, field experiences provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to develop their pedagogical skills, anchor their developing beliefs and put theory into practice in order to prepare them for future teaching jobs (Kauffman, 1992; Puckett & Anderson, 2002). Such
competencies, for instance, have been found to help trainee-teachers to better understand the students' out-of-school experiences in order to effectively address them in their classrooms (Coffey, 2010). During supervision both the external and internal supervisors supervise the student and are important to the success of the student experiences (Cooper, 1995). The training provided for trainee-teachers, which leads to the development of the appropriate teaching skills and professional proficiencies, paves way for trainee-teachers to secure employment after field experience. It has been established that designing and planning exemplary field experiences for education programme candidates is essential for retaining teachers on the job (Gold, 1996).

Field experience is also important because pre-service teachers enter teacher education programmes with strong beliefs and values about teaching and learning, as they have been students for the majority of their lifetime (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Some of these beliefs are likely to be misconceptions about teaching and learning, and sometimes, even about the teaching profession as a whole. People generally seem to have a negative perception about the teaching profession. Some see it as a stepping stone to other more lucrative professions. There are situations where trainee-teachers enter teacher education programmes, probably because they could not get their first choice course at the university. Such students then aim towards just obtaining a first degree and branching off to other programmes or professions of interest after being trained to teach. These beliefs are unlikely to change unless students are offered experiences that “challenge their validity” (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987, p. 9; Marx, 2004). This is to say that field experience helps to change trainee-teachers’ misconceptions about teaching and the teaching profession as a whole. From a casual observation, there appears to be a total change in the attitude of trainee-teachers towards the teaching profession, after interacting with other professional teachers on the job during field experience.

1.3 Research Question

Based on the purpose of the study and the issues raised in the literature, the overarching question that guides the study is that: What are the perceived benefits of field experience to trainee Economics teachers?

1.4 Context

The University of Cape Coast was founded in 1962 as University College of Education, designated University College of Science Education 1964-1966; resumed former title in 1966; and incorporated by University of Cape Coast decree 1967 with effect from October 1, 1966. Under the University of Cape Coast Act, 1971 (Act 390) the college became a full university (under the name, University of Cape Coast) with effect from 1st October, 1971. The University was established out of a dire need for highly qualified and skilled manpower in education to provide leadership and enlightenment. Its original mandate was therefore to train graduate professional teachers for Ghana's second cycle institutions and the Ministry of Education, in order to meet the manpower needs of the country's accelerated education programme at the time (University of Cape Coast, 2010).

The University of Cape Coast currently runs a four-year Bachelor of Education programme which requires students to participate in off-campus teaching practice in an accredited senior high or basic school (junior high and primary school), depending on the programmes being pursued by students. Initially, students spent all the four years of the programme on campus and the field experience was organized for one month during the first semester break, after students had undertaken a micro-teaching course for one semester in the third year. However, the programme has been reviewed to seven semesters on-campus for the course work and one semester off-campus for teaching practice. Students are required by the teaching practice unit of the University to choose schools where they would wish to embark on their teaching field experience. The teaching practice unit will then liaise with the schools concerned and make final arrangements before the exercise begins. However, there have been instances where students go to some of the schools selected for the exercise, only to be told there was no vacancy. As a result of that, students are encouraged to make their own arrangements or search for schools and seek approval from the heads before notifying the teaching practice unit to make the final arrangements.

Internal supervisors are appointed in the various schools to monitor the activities of trainee - teachers (students on teaching practice). Subject teachers whose classes are taken over by trainee - teachers are supposed to also serve as role models and mentor the students in the classroom. At the start of the programme, trainee-teachers are encouraged to furnish the leader of the team of supervisors in their area with their timetables. Supervisors are sent from the teaching practice unit in two batches, for a period of time (usually two weeks) to supervise students. After each observation session, the supervisor is supposed to discuss with students his/her strengths
and weakness and make suggestions for improving practice.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH

Data was collected in two main ways: focus group discussion (audio recordings) and student interviews. The focus group discussion took the form of a class discussion with all 101 Economics education students in level four hundred. These students had undergone field experience and were better placed to provide the relevant information for the study. The students were divided into ten groups and each group was asked to discuss among its members the benefits they derived from field experience. Each group was then asked to present its views to the whole class for discussion. We then recorded the ensuing class discussions. The focus group discussion was employed to obtain the general consensus of trainee-Economics teachers about the issues raised. This was to ensure that the information obtained represented the views of the whole group and not a few sampled individuals. It also helped us to identify certain thematic areas to aid discussion.

Out of the 101 students, 20 students were selected by means of accidental sampling technique for interview. Students were interviewed in the office as they came to present their final year project work. The essence of the interview was to find out from students their own specific views about field experience and also to find out why they had such views. This gave us in-depth information for our analysis and also to understand the case of each individual student and the experiences he/she had during field experience. The information obtained also helped us to elaborate more on the issues raised during the focused group discussion.

The data analysis focused on the major theme bothering on the research question that guided the study. The main theme was the benefits of field experience to trainee Economics teachers. Under this major theme, sub themes were derived based on the thematic analysis of the focused group discussion. Emerging themes were then discussed; citing individual cases from the interview data to explain the consensus arrived at during the focused group discussion. The analysis was organized around the research questions because according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p. 468) "this is a very useful way of organizing data, as it draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to the researcher, and preserves the coherence of the material".

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study results in terms of the perceived benefits trainee Economics teachers obtain from field experience.

3.1 Benefits of Field Experience to Trainee Economics Teachers

The analysis of the data obtained through the focused group discussion and the individual interviews clearly indicated that trainee-teachers perceived field experience to be very important to them in terms of helping them develop professional proficiencies. Among such professional proficiencies cited by trainee - teachers included: the development of pedagogical skills and improvement in content knowledge; development of social skills; and acquisition of work experience.

With respect to the development of pedagogical skills and improvement in content knowledge, the trainee-teachers generally agreed during the focused group discussion that the off-campus field experience helped them to fully understand some of the teaching practices they were taught during lectures and also helped them to apply some of the key economics concepts they had learned in class. Among some of the benefits students identified with were that field experience helped them to acquire skills in classroom management and control. One trainee-teacher buttressed this point during the one on one interview by stating that "during the off-campus teaching practice, there were a number of occasions where I had to quickly cut into students' discussions to prevent other students from making fun of their friends in class. Such scenarios were never present during micro-teaching on campus". Another student also indicated that "I acquired skills such as classroom management and control, time management, and management of students' behaviour". It also emerged during the focused group discussion that field experience helped build trainee-teachers' knowledge in Economics. There was a general consensus among them that the exercise helped them to acquire more knowledge and also to apply certain key concepts during their teaching. As John (pseudo name) indicated during the one on one interview, "there were certain concepts I didn't fully understand during lectures, but during the off-campus teaching practice, the more I taught and discussed those concepts with students, the better the understanding I got". Among other skills developed as indicated by students included the opportunity to employ a variety of teaching techniques and also the effective use of questions during teaching. One
student said the exercises "provided me a platform to apply the various methods of teaching", and another student also intimated that "it helped me to learn how to handle students' questions".

From the foregoing findings, it is very much obvious that students perceived field experience to be very important because it gave them the opportunity to practice the theories of teaching they had acquired during their course work on campus. This as they indicated helped them to improve upon such essentials skills required for effective teaching in the classroom. This finding is supported by the assertion that field experiences provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to develop their pedagogical skills, anchor their developing beliefs and put theory into practice in order to prepare them for future teaching jobs (Kauffman, 1992; Puckett & Anderson, 2002). Again it agrees with the view point by Richards & Crooks (1988) that field experience enhances the development of skills such as classroom management skills, lesson planning, awareness of teaching style, and ability to interact with students.

Another very important benefit students perceived to have derived from field experience is the development of social skills. Among the list of social skills students outlined during the focus group discussion included: learning to accept the views of students from different backgrounds; developing good relations with colleague teachers on the field; improvement in communicative skills; development of self-confidence; and the ability to work in a group. These findings were corroborated and further explained by the data obtained during the one on one interview. The following are some of the views that emerged with respect to the one on one interview. Hannah (pseudo name) said during the interview that "I used to be very shy and I always didn't feel comfortable speaking in front of people. But during the off-campus teaching practice, I had to teach and the more I talked with students, the more I became comfortable. Now, I'm not very shy". Another student also indicated that the exercise helped him to be more tolerant of other people's views. In his own words, "I had to try and adjust so I could tolerate both students and teachers who had different beliefs and political convictions from mine. It really helped to generate interesting discussions during teaching". As indicated by Coffey (2010), such competencies have been found to help trainee-teachers to better understand the students' out of-school experiences in order to effectively address them in their classrooms. Again as explained by Richards & Crooks, (1988), among a range of skills developed on field experience is an enhanced ability of the trainee-teacher to interact with students.

The final group of benefits trainee-teachers believe to have derived during field experience was classified under the theme "acquisition of work experience", during the focused group discussion. Some of the experiences trainee-teacher agreed to have acquired include: the experience of working under direct supervision; more practical insight into the teaching profession, in terms of acceptable code of conduct; an understanding of the administrative structures of schools; changes in perceptions about the teaching profession; development of interest in the teaching profession as well as creation of employment opportunities. One of the interviewees indicated that field experience gave him more insight into the teaching profession, which helped him develop more interest in the profession. He indicated that "it was a lovely experience. It enabled me to realize my passion for teaching. I think I was born to teach". Another interviewee also said she felt a sense of self-fulfillment for also being afforded the opportunity to teach someone "for me, it was a great accomplishment that I was able to teach other people". Other trainee-teachers interviewed also affirmed that the exercise helped them to experience first-hand the activities that go on in a school, such as the day to day running of the school, code of conduct for teachers on the field and the opportunity to work with supervisors and mentors who helped them on their field experience. The interview also revealed that the exercise helped build the confidence of students and also prepared them for future life experiences. These sets of findings agree with research findings that field experience prepares trainee-teachers for the teaching job (Gold, 1996, Coffey, 2010); helps to reorient the beliefs of students about the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 2006, Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987, p. 9, Marx, 2004) and giving trainee-teachers work experience by providing them the opportunity to work in settings they would be working in after their training (Sleeter, 2008).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be concluded that trainee economics teachers, after their off-campus or field - based experience, perceived field experience to be very important to their training as teachers. Key among the benefits trainee teachers perceive to have obtained are: the development of pedagogical skills and improvement in content knowledge; development of social skills; and acquisition of work experience. It also became evident that the exercise helped dispel the misgivings some trainee-teachers had about teaching and aroused their interest in the teaching profession.
Considering the findings of the study, it is recommended that students be given early field experiences for them to fully understand the theories they learn in the lecture room and blend it with practice, before the eventual field experience where they are required to teach to be observed. The early field experience could take the form of vacation attachment in senior high schools where they would sit in the classroom to observe how the teacher teaches in everyday practice and try to apply it to the theories they are learning during lectures. This will help students appreciate the essence of field experience in their preparation and encourage them to approach the exercise and the teaching profession with much seriousness.

To make it more effective, student-teachers during the long vacation after the second year should be made to embark on an observational study in any school of their choice. During this period, they would serve as teaching assistants to the teachers in the schools they have chosen and in their respective subject areas. At the end of the one month observational studies, they will be required to present a report on the exercise and comments from their mentors. This should form part of their assessment in the methods of teaching in the third year first semester.

REFERENCES

17. Sparks, P., Shepherd, R. Frewer, L. J. (1994). Gene technology, food production, and public opinion; a UK study. Agriculture and Human Values, 11(1) 19-28