

Students' Perceptions on Education Internship Program in Rwanda: Effectiveness and Challenges

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ABSTRACT--- *The paper focuses on the experiences and perceptions of student internees in the College of Education under the University of Rwanda. The primary aim of the study was to reveal how internees perceive the internship program that was newly introduced. Findings reveal that where as internees consider the internship program as being beneficial in their career development, the level of supervision by both mentors and supervisors in regard to action research needs improvement. In addition emphasis given to action research during training was not sufficient. They also expressed their dissatisfaction by saying that they receive supervision on writing their action research report too late and that there is no harmony in presentation as there seems to be different viewpoints from supervisors*

Keywords--- internship, supervision, action research

1. BACKGROUND

Ask most parents and they will tell you that it is the teacher who matters most in the education of their children. The conversation then turns to what kinds of teachers we need, and, this focuses upon competencies and skills required of today's knowledge workers (Day et al, 2007). It is a known fact that apart from family background, it is good teachers who make the greatest difference to student outcomes from schooling. Individual teachers have more impact on student outcomes than do whole-school effects and particular classroom practices are linked to high-quality student performance (Hayes et al, 2006) The current demand for teacher candidates to prove a positive impact on student achievement and work collaboratively in a field that is perennially in change has called for a new paradigm for teacher preparation, one that focuses on clinical field experiences, culturally responsive teaching and reflective, collaborative pedagogy (Janine et al., 2011). The co-teach model for student teaching offers improved student learning by allowing for differentiated approaches to instruction and establishing communication practices necessary for professional collaboration.

Globally the teaching internship has been cited as the most significant, exciting, and difficult experience teacher trainees encounter throughout their entire teacher preparation program. In order to prepare student teachers for their internships, it is critical to understand the issues and challenges they face during their student teaching. Fletcher, Mountjoy and Bailey (2011) observe that it is critical that teacher educators discuss strategies and techniques for classroom management, help form synergistic relationships with qualified and passionate mentor teachers and university supervisors, and only assign coursework that are critical for the development of the student teachers in their internships. Beginning teachers are confronted with numerous challenges especially in their first year of teaching. Without ample induction support, the beginning teachers could merely develop their capacity on their own (Tak, 2005). Therefore, some nations implement the policy of internship so as to increase effectiveness of the beginning teachers. While research has shown that the co-teach model for the student teaching internship yields improved learning for the students in the classroom, less focus has been placed on the student teachers' perceptions of their internship experiences.

Objectives Of the Study

This study is specifically designed to:

1. Identify school, and classroom experiences of teacher internees in the college of education in the academic year 2012-13.
2. Determine the level of supervision given to internees by supervisors and mentors.
3. Establish benefits of the internship program to internees and suggest possible measures for the improvement of internship program in the University Of Rwanda College Of Education.

Research Questions

1. What experiences do teacher internees get while in cooperating schools?
2. To what extent are internees satisfied with the guidance they receive from mentors?
3. Do supervisors from the college of education demonstrate adequate professional guidance to internees?
4. What significant benefits does the internship program provide to internees?

Internship program

Internship is designed to prepare teachers not only for their roles as classroom teachers of students, but as professionals studying their own teaching practice, participating in site based decision making and coordinating their work with teachers and other members of the school community. Obviously, these cannot be accomplished without close coordination across all of the parts of the program and across the faculty as well. In the Intern Teaching Program, both mentors and university faculty are expected to work closely together to support and assist interns as they progress through the exercise.

The best way to student skills in any profession, especially teaching, is through personal experience. An education internship is expected to give students a chance to immerse themselves in the classroom teaching experience. Student teaching/internship is the culminating experience for the aspiring teacher. It is designed to be an intensive, full-time classroom experience that allows the pre-service teacher to further develop and refine the skills, competencies and dispositions needed to be an effective educator in today's schools. Student teachers/interns work closely with experienced mentor teachers and university supervisors to become reflective professionals who create environments, organize content knowledge, and teach in ways that promote student learning.

The purposes of the Intern Teaching Program are to improve the preparation of intern teachers, to offer professional development for the mentor teachers, to improve instruction for students in these schools and to assure the continuing professional development of college faculty. In this case an intern teacher is a university student who is assigned full time for one semester or two to a school and who is preparing to be a teacher by studying and teaching under the guidance of a mentor teacher. A mentor teacher is an experienced teacher who guides the practice of an individual intern teacher, or an intern pair and who participates regularly in studying and reflecting about his/her role with other mentor teachers and a university cluster coordinator.

The College of Education is dedicated to providing leadership and quality programs for advancing and merging the theory and practice of teaching. To this end, the College has established several new collaborative efforts with area public schools. The Intern Teaching Program is designed to be a high quality experience for intern teachers as well as their mentor teachers and students. Participating schools and school districts serve as "cluster sites" where several interns are placed in school with mentor teachers in order to work and learn together as reflective practitioners. The whole exercise is organized by the department of career advisory center. The center identifies cooperating schools and makes placement of internees according to subject need of individual school. It also identifies and recruits mentors who happen to be experienced teachers working in the cooperating schools. To put everything in perspective a workshop for mentors and lecturers who will act as supervisors is then organized where all procedures regarding action research and internship are detailed.

The school practice program was anchored by the on campus learning programs where students would do course work on campus and then get attached to cooperating schools for a period of three months for observation, development and assessment of practical skills in teaching and learning. However in 2003, Kigali institute of Education(KIE) now known as University of Rwanda College of Education and the ministry of education extended the internship period for education students from three months to one year. The teacher trainees would spend their year, which is their final year in teaching practice. The objective of increasing periods for internship among students pursuing their respective degree and diploma courses was aimed at improving their practical teaching skills. In the college of education as it is the practice in higher learning institutions, students in their third year of training enroll for the module Educational Research and development to acquaint them with methods and procedures of undertaking research work. In addition to this the college through the faculty of education organizes workshops for this group of students before they proceed for internship. The aim of the workshops is to acquaint them with expectations and requirement in doing internship and action research.

Conceptual framework

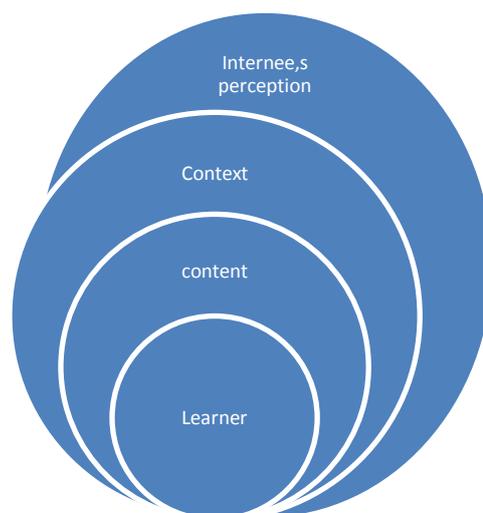


Fig.1 Internship experience

The quality of teaching in higher education institutions is key to unlocking the full potential of students and creating a healthy economy and society. High caliber teachers, and the institutions and systems that support them, clearly impact on these challenges. Figure 1 shows that the internee continually and reflectively examines, builds and extends knowledge and practice about the learner, content and the context within which teaching and learning occur. This leads to the internee developing his perception about the internship program. It is at the same time expected that the internee will simultaneously be renewing his teaching practice. Experiences like these will enable the academic unit to focus its always scarce resources in the development of learning processes, in the application of technology, and in building alliances both with external constituencies within the university (Diamond, 2000). If an academic unit's strategies and resource allocations are aligned with its selected area(s) of focus, the result will be competent teachers who are empowered to mitigate the challenges in the teaching profession.

Action Research in internship

Following entry into the workforce, there are limited opportunities for new graduate teachers to engage in critically reflective activities about their educative practice. In an increasingly complex and challenging profession, the need for teachers, administrators and school systems to become involved in professional development activities is ever present. Undertaking a unit in action research methodology provides those professionals working in the education system with a systematic, reflective approach to address areas of need within their respective domains.(Hine, 2013)

Action research is a paradigm that reflects the principle that reality is constructed through individual or collective conceptualizations and definitions of a particular situation requiring a wide spectrum of research methodologies. Ordinarily, action research studies a problematic situation in an ongoing systematic and recursive way to take action to change that situation. Action research is also seen as a process of concurrently investigating problems and taking action to solve them. It is a sustained, intentional, and dynamic process of inquiry in which the teacher takes an action purposefully and ethically in a specific classroom context to improve teaching/learning. Action research is an attractive option for teacher researchers, school administrative staff, and other stakeholders in the teaching and learning environment to consider (Mills, 2011). This practice assumes that teachers are the agents and source of educational reform because it empowers them to own professional knowledge through the process of action inquiry conceptualizing, creating, transforming and applying knowledge. It enables teachers to reflect on their practice to improve it, become more autonomous in professional judgment, develop a more energetic and dynamic environment for teaching and learning, articulate and build their craft knowledge, and recognize and appreciate their own expertise. At the same time, action research can enhance the lives of those professionals who work within educational systems (Holter & Frabutt, 2012). Broadly speaking, action research enables teachers to develop a systematic, inquiring approach toward their own practices (Frabutt et al., 2008) that is geared towards effecting positive change in this practice.

Action research provides teachers with a systematic process to reflect, consider options, implement and evaluate potential solutions. Action research differs from the day-to-day decision making that teachers do (Alberta

Teachers' Association [ATA], 2000). Action research is a strategy teachers can use to investigate a problem or area of interest specific to their professional context. It provides the structure to engage in a planned, systematic and documented process of professional growth. At its core, action research encourages teachers to share their experiences about how they have worked through an educational concern. Therefore, providing teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and focus to engage in meaningful inquiry about their professional practice enhances this practice, and effect positive changes concerning the educative goals of the learning community. At the same time, and with the interests of best practice in mind, action research encourages teachers to become continuous learners within their classrooms and schools (Mills, 2011).

2. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Haugan, et al. (2012) carried a study on student teachers' relational concerns in teacher education. They followed four Grade 3 Norwegian student teachers during their internship for two periods of two weeks each. Their analysis indicates that the student teachers' motives for their interpersonal relations with pupils are more sophisticated than what has been found with other research and are driven by personal and perceived pupil needs. Sahin and Serkan (2009) conducted a quantitative research to examine technological and pedagogical experiences of Turkish student teachers in a US Department of State sponsored international internship program. The internship program had a specific emphasis on student-centered teaching and technology integration. Findings suggested that the Turkish student teachers had the opportunity to observe the professional and educational applications of computer technologies during their internship program. These interns reported to have observed instructional computer use by the mentor teacher, effective student learning, and a variety of teaching strategies more frequently.

Rozelle, and Wilson (2012) Employed ethnographic methods to describe and explain changes to six beginning science teachers' practices and beliefs during a yearlong internship. They found that initially, all six interns attempted to re-enact lessons they witnessed their cooperating teachers teach, including following lesson structures and borrowing representations, anecdotes, and jokes. Later, they independently implemented instruction that emphasized similar strategies as their mentors, regardless of whether or not they were experiencing success. Interns who were successful also shifted their beliefs to match their mentors. Exploring the understanding of classroom research of pre-service science teachers regarding the problems in conducting a classroom research project and the supports that they need from their cooperating teachers in conducting the classroom research project, Jantarakantee et al. (2012) established that most of the pre-service science teachers understood the principles of classroom research. The problems the pre-service science teachers encountered in conducting classroom research were the limitation of time, generating suitable research question and selecting the innovation to solve the problem. Further the findings revealed that Pre-service science teachers would like recommendations from their cooperating teachers more frequently for promoting the pre-service science teachers' confidence and efficiency in their chosen classroom research projects.

Fletcher, (2012) examined the perspectives of an expert panel of 31 business education university supervisors from the U.S. and Canada using a modified Delphi approach regarding the areas in which mentor teachers are typically most and least prepared. Findings indicated business education mentor teachers are most prepared in the areas of classroom management, teaching-related administrative duties, and establishing rapport. The majority of the university supervisors believed business teacher preparation programs could provide mentor teachers with professional development on mentoring and expectations prior to the internship. Investigating the professional identity development of teacher candidates participating in an informal afterschool science internship in a formal science teacher preparation programme Phyllis (2011) learned that the experience in an afterschool informal internship encouraged the teacher candidates to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as enacting key recommendations by science education standards documents, including exhibiting: positive attitudes, sensitivity to diversity, and increasing confidence in facilitating hands-on science participation, inquiry, and collaborative work. Phyllis also provided evidence that the infusion of an informal science education internship in a formal science teacher education programme influenced positively participants' professional identity development as science teachers.

Rhoads, Radu, and Weber (2011) interviewed Nine prospective secondary mathematics teachers about their teaching internship experience and found out that they had positive experiences with their cooperating teachers and university supervisors while others had negative experiences. They further found that the participants valued freedom to use their own teaching methods, and a friendly and supportive relationship with their mentors. The differing teaching philosophies of student teachers and their cooperating teachers contributed to negative experiences only when student teachers were not allowed freedom in their teaching methods. All these studies basically reveal that internship programs play a significant role in both teaching and learning. More importantly they help in building confidence and familiarizing the teacher trainees with the best practices in the teaching profession.

3. METHODOLOGY

The Design of the study was a descriptive survey aimed at bringing out the ways and extent to which teacher internees experience and perceive their internship program. The descriptive survey is selected because the primary purpose of this study is to determine the perception regarding the nature, effectiveness and weaknesses of internship program offered to students at the college of education. The study population involved fifth year students of 2012-2013 academic year of the college of education. A systematic random sampling technique was adopted in coming up with a sample of 422 teacher internees. The research employed likert scale questionnaire for the data collection. The questionnaire consisting of 21 items was piloted and modified accordingly and was administered directly. The data collected through questionnaire was analyzed by using descriptive statistical procedure by computing means and standard deviation and then presented thematically.

4. FINDINGS

The study findings are presented thematically based on research question and interpretations of the mean rating of the respondents were based on the interpretations of the mean rating of the respondents were based on the following scale: 4.20 – 5.00(Excellent), 3.40– 4.19(Good), 2.60 – 3.39(need improvement), 1.80 – 2.59(Poor), 1.00 – 1.79(Very poor)

Table 1 School and classroom experiences

No	Items of Concern	Mean	SD
2	Attitude of learners towards interns	4.06	0.42
5	Internship experiences	4.13	0.39
12	School location	2.76	1.00
15	Relationship of what was taught in action research and what was applied	3.40	0.71
N = 422		3.58	0.63

The interns expressed satisfaction as far as the attitude of learners towards them was concern (4.06) as shown in table 1. They also described their internship experience as being very good (4.13). However as regarding the application of what was learnt to what was expected to be done in action research, majority of interns felt that the rating was somehow average (3.40). Other concerns were indiscipline among learners and this was attributed to interns being trainees making them not to be perceived as regular teachers. The complain of having to deal with large classes was also raised for this makes it difficult to effectively implement teaching strategies. Whereas interns derived a number of benefits in their internship program they expressed dissatisfaction in the way placement is done especially with regard to location of schools (2.76) with a SD of 1.00. In spite of these shortcomings a mean of (3.58) and a SD of 0.63 indicate that the internees generally had a good experience in their respective schools.

Table 2 Internee perception on supervisors

No.	Item of concern	Mean	SD
1	Level of Supervision	4.32	0.30
4	Level of guidance received	2.99	0.90
6	Supervisors understanding of action research	3.46	0.69
8	Advice in writing action research report	3.95	0.47
13	Explanation of tasks in action research	3.43	0.70
N= 422		3.63	0.61

Findings as indicated in table 2 show that supervision the interns received was satisfactory (4.32). The guidance in classroom teaching and in writing action research was relatively poor (2.99). On the other hand the interns rated the supervisor level of understanding of action research as (3.46). They also indicated that the advice they received in developing the action research reports was good (3.95) and that the level of explanation given was equally fair (3.43). In as much as the interns rate the level of supervision as (3.63) with a SD of (0.61). They also expressed their dissatisfaction

by saying that they receive supervision on writing their action research report too late and that there is no harmony in presentation as there seems to be different viewpoints from supervisors.

What marks teachers out as good, is not only their content knowledge and pedagogical skills. It is their commitment to their teaching, their students and their learning and achievement. Not only are supervisors expected to have strong knowledge of their content, they are expected to be skilled in using a variety of instructional strategies, be continuous learners themselves and excel at planning and analyzing student learning outcomes. This also requires additional training in action research which can easily be done through workshop

Table 3 Internee perception on mentors

No	Item of Concern	Mean	SD
7	Assistance in action research process	3.41	0.71
14	Assistance in planning internship activities	<u>2.63</u>	<u>1.51</u>
N= 422		3.02	1.11

Mentors in carrying out their roles seemed to provide good assistance to internees in their action research work (3.41) as indicated in table 3 . However it was revealed that the quality of discussion and planning of internship activities between the mentors and interns was not adequate (2.63). In general a mean of (3.02) and a SD of (1.11) indicate that the level of supervision was not good. Internees strongly indicated that mentors lack sufficient information on how to conduct action research and that they don't spend enough time mentoring them as expected. Participants valued critical feedback that was constructive and contained concrete recommendations for improvement with their mentors. Fletcher, Mountjoy and Bailey(2011) observe that it is critical that teacher educators discuss strategies and techniques for classroom management, help form synergistic relationships with qualified and passionate mentor teachers and university supervisors, and only assign coursework that are critical for the development of the student teachers in their internships. Johnson (2012) asserts that action research bridges the gap between research and practice. For instance, the theoretical components underpinning action research practice are used to help practitioners understand and observe what is happening in a classroom setting

Table 4 Benefits derived from internship program

No	Item of Concern	Mean	SD
3	Opportunities to learn new things	3.85	0.51
9	Action research and teaching practice	4.05	0.42
10	Role of internship in preparing for work	3.83	0.52
11	Action research in teaching and learning	3.94	0.47
16	Confidence in handling school responsibilities	<u>4.23</u>	<u>0.35</u>
N= 422		3.98	0.45

Table 4 shows that the interns indicated that the exercise of conducting action research while undertaking their teaching afforded them opportunities to learn new things (3.85). Action research enabled them to reflect critically on their teaching style and practice (4.05). The internship program was also seen as a good way of preparing interns for the world of work as competent teachers (3.83). It was further revealed that action research contributes a lot towards improving teaching and learning (3.94). In general the interns expressed confidence in handling all school responsibilities after the internship exercise (4.23). It is evident that the internees are positive about the benefits they derived from the whole program of internship (3.98) and SD of (0.45). This quite agrees with Phyllis (2011) findings that the experience in an afterschool informal internship encouraged the teacher candidates to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as enacting key recommendations, including exhibiting positive attitudes, sensitivity to diversity, and increasing confidence in facilitating hands-on science participation, inquiry, and collaborative work. These experiences indicate that we must support the programs that prepare highly effective educators and offer high-quality and substantive curricula and clinical preparation experiences. These preparation should include significant opportunities that involve highly effective teachers or principals to oversee, mentor, and evaluate aspiring educators in the school environments in which the candidates will ultimately work. Further, aspiring educators must meet a high bar for entering the profession, demonstrating strong knowledge in the content they teach; have mastered a repertoire of instructional strategies and know when to use each appropriately

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Peter Drucker a business guru says that the single most important thing to remember about any enterprise is that there are no results inside its walls. The result is a satisfied customer. The result of a hospital is a healed patient. The result of a school is a student who has learned something and puts it to work ten years later. Inside an enterprise there are only cost centers. Results exist only on the outside. In this regard internship program is an effective way to give training to the student-teachers about real world of work. It provides an opportunity to integrate theory and practice in teaching. The program help student teachers to plan and deliver lessons properly, critically analyze their own and peers teaching styles and improve. Internship coupled with action research provides internee teachers an opportunity to critically reflect and improve on their practice. The whole program then cannot be perceived to be effective if those who are charged with the role of supervision and mentoring do not work closely with internees. This requires time and commitment in giving constructive feed back with the aim of developing student-teacher personalities as professionals. Enhancing internship program is therefore critical to improved pedagogical strategies that will promote student learning and in improving the quality of education. In this respect the college of education has the task to elevate and transform teaching so that all graduates are prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century. As the demands of our world continue to expand, learners need educators who are well prepared to meet the ever changing learning environment and expectations of various stake holders.

6. RECOMMENDATION

It is significant that the college of education integrates the module on internship and action research in the regular teaching program. This will afford students humble time to internalize the process and also help in addressing pertinent issues that may be anticipated rather than doing it at the end just before students proceed for internship.

Supervisors seem to be stuck in the practice of supervising memoir or research projects that have been faced out and have not impressed the concept of action research. There is need to enhance training for both supervisors and mentors specifically on action research

Currently the exercise of supervision seem to be done in hurry as supervisors move from one school to the other and at the same time expected to fulfill their teaching obligation. There is need for supervisors to spend quality time with internees and this can be achieved by extending the supervision period

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