Departure from Generic to Individualised Student Support: A Case of ODeL Teaching Practicum Experiences at Mzuzu University in Malawi

Christopher Mpewe, Robert Kalima

Faculty of Education, Mzuzu University, Mzuzu, Malawi

Email address:

chrismpewe67@yahoo.com (Christopher Mpewe)

Abstract: Individualised learning support to students has always been a challenge to educationists worldwide. This has been the case due to a number of factors where enrollment is high, course material is standardized and stable, and faculty resources are scarce which also include as lack of technological tools, heavy workloads and large student numbers (O'Donnell, et al 2013). This has not spared Mzuzu University in the area of student support in open and distance e-learning especially during teaching practicum. Teaching practicum is part of teacher education program at Mzuzu University where students studying education at this university are required to do in the actual classroom situation of various secondary schools in Malawi. ODeL student support at Mzuzu University during teaching practicum is generic which shows insensitivity to the heterogeneous ODeL students. Furthermore, ODeL students at Mzuzu University are heterogeneous in terms of age, socioeconomic status and work experience. This paper endeavors to explore best possible student support practices and procedures that should be put in place to make teaching practicum experiences stimulating, enriching and relevant to ODeL students as individuals. This paper draws on social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Data in this study was generated through a survey using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to a purposively sampled participants of cohort2 (level 3) students studying through ODeL at Mzuzu University. Cohort 2 students is a second group of students to be enrolled into ODeL programs at Mzuzu University and did teaching practicum in 2015 in various secondary schools in Malawi. The study found that ODeL teaching practices at Mzuzu University in Malawi are too generic and need to be more responsive to the specific contexts in which the student teachers find themselves.

Keywords: Student Support, Generic, Individualization, Teaching Practicum

1. Introduction

Mzuzu University follows a duo mode of training in which there is face-to-face and ODeL. Face-to-face learning is an instructional method where course content and learning materials are taught in person to a group of students. This allows for a live interaction between a learner and an instructor. It is the most traditional type of learning instruction. Learners benefit from a greater level of interaction with their fellow students as well. In face-to-face learning, students are held accountable for their progress at the class's specific meeting date and time. Face-to-face learning ensures a better understanding and recollection of lesson content and gives class members a chance to bond with one another. While in the ODeL mode, students used to come on campus for a 4-week orientation and then leave for home study on their own away from campus for the rest of the semester (9 weeks) before they are called back on campus to take end of semester examinations.

Pre-service teachers on education programs both face-to face and ODeL mode of training undergo teaching practice or teaching practicum before they are certified as teachers. [1] view teaching practicum as critical to the development of student teachers because they can apply practical pedagogical

knowledge acquired during the didactic lessons and workshops. The concept of student teaching practice is globally rooted in training pre-service teachers to work within diverse schools and learner populations, in dissimilar contexts. It is also a drive towards the development of knowledge, professionalism, sense of efficacy, and flexibility in their performance and interactions (In Malawi this is done to both primary and secondary school pre-service teachers). For these students to successfully conduct the teaching practice, they require support which comes in different forms. The mode of study for the students also determines the nature and degree of support accorded to them.

In an ODeL context at Mzuzu University in Malawi, the support TP students are supposed to get is both academic and administrative. While other forms of support such as upkeep and materials to be used are not considered during the TP exercise. This is due because of the case in which the mode of study students go through. Most of these student-teachers struggle to pay for accommodation (since most schools do not give them free houses) and to find quality resources for effective teaching. By policy, ODeL students are self-sponsored and as such they are required to support themselves throughout the course of study regardless of the nature of support except academic and administrative support as earlier mentioned. Most students during teaching practicum were concerned with the kind of support they received from University Supervisors and secondary school Cooperating teachers. As a result their performance in teaching was not effective enough as required, furthermore their theoretical understanding of teaching could not result into appropriate skills suitable for learners. The study focuses on the theory of Zone of Proximal Development which suggests that adults play a role in children's problem solving activities while taking into account the child's level of understanding [2]. During the initial learning stages, adults offer large amounts of assistance and as the child becomes more competent, the adult removes assistance gradually. Under this assumption, learning begins as a social activity before it becomes an independent one. In order to enhance pre-service teachers the study would like to consider the aspect of support as a critical tool which can appropriately transform the theoretical aspects into practical. The study focuses much on the support that was provided during teaching practicum by both University and school.

1.1. Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to establish an extent to which ODeL student teaching practicum at Mzuzu University support be conducted in order to meet individual student needs, competencies, knowledge and skills.

Research question

Do the current teaching practicum enhance or inhibit individualised student support? How do the individualized support for ODeL student-teachers on teaching practicum be enhanced?

Sub-research questions

1) What were the positive student support experienced by students during cohort 2 teaching practicum?
2) What challenges were experienced by students during teaching practicum?
3) How could the support to teachers be effectively done to achieve idividualised learning?

1.2. The ODL Teaching Practicum at Mzuzu University

The ODL teaching practicum at Mzuzu University in Malawi takes place in the second semester of level three of study. At this point in time students are assumed to have acquired adequate pedagogical skills and content which would enable them to teach any two specialized subjects in secondary schools as stipulated by the Malawi Government Education Policy [3]. This group of students who go for teaching practice are from varying backgrounds in terms of teaching. Some do have teaching experience having taught in primary schools before while others (minority) do not have this experience as they are just coming right away from secondary schools. Even though this is the case both groups of student-teachers have been trained equally in pedagogy and content as a requirement before going for teaching practicum.

The teaching practicum exercise at Mzuzu University is organized by the Teaching Practice Coordinator who is responsible for placing and allocating student-teachers to different teaching practicum schools. This is done in liaison with Teaching Practicum Committee which is composed of members from the Faculty of Education and precisely the Department of Education and Teaching Studies. In the context of ODeL teaching practicum, a member from the Centre for Open and Distance e-Learning (CODeL) makes part of the team for administrative and logistical support.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

ODeL student population at Mzuzu University is diverse in terms of work experience (with or without teaching related experience and with or without any work experience), age, rural/urban mix and of course gender. This diversity calls for flexibility in approach to teaching practicum supervision. This has not been the case in the practice of ODeL teaching practicum supervision. This has been observed that students on teaching practicum do not gain enough skills and better knowledge required for an effective teacher. In addition, the teaching practicum conducted towards the final stage of the teacher education program is rather limiting for student teachers' professional development. There could be so many contributing factors, however, the study focused much on the support provided towards their teaching practicum. [4, 5] alluded that teachers who receive support have been shown to perceive themselves as effective and to enjoy their work. This has prompted the researcher to find out ways of enhancing the kind of support towards this teaching practicum for ODeL student-teachers.

Graduate teacher could be enhanced through supervision of student teachers by subject specialists and prolonging the

teaching practice duration.

2. Teaching Practicum and ODL Student Placement in Schools at Mzuzu University

In ODL context at Mzuzu University, student placement in teaching practicum schools is done by the Teaching Practicum Coordinator with consultations from the students themselves. This is done to make teaching practicum experiences less challenging to students in terms of upkeep as students fend for themselves during this period. Because of this, most students opt for schools closer to their homes most of which are rural areas. These rural schools are a challenge to the teaching practicum coordinator in terms of teaching/learning resource constraints and accessibility.

After the self-placement into schools, the Teaching Practicum Coordinator and his team visit the schools to check the suitability of the schools in terms of material and human resource. Upon being satisfied that the school (s) can host the teaching practicum student (s), the University through the Teaching Practicum Coordinator officially informs the host schools of the students intending to do teaching practicum at those schools.

3. Research Methodology

This was a case study involving qualitative and quantitative methodology. The study involved 86 participants to collect data in schools and at university where the training took place before going to schools. 76 student-teachers were purposeful sampled since all students had information for the study. The study also used structured interviews to the Teaching Practicum Coordinator, 5 methodology lecturers from Mzuzu university and 15 secondary school head teachers. The head teachers were sampled randomly from the three regions of Malawi where students were doing the TP (3 in urban schools and 2 in rural schools). A semi structured questionnaire was used as an instrument to collect data from 35 student-teachers and 30 cooperating teachers. The questionnaires were distributed to participants two weeks before the completion of teaching practicum exercise. It was relatively easy to get feedback from respondents since participants were at one place (on campus). University lecturers and TP Coordinator were interviewed to get information on how they prepare these teachers for teaching practicum.

4. Results and Discussion of Findings

The data was generated from the survey that was conducted on cohort 2 teaching practicum participants (students). The data has been summarized and presented in graphical format as indicated below.
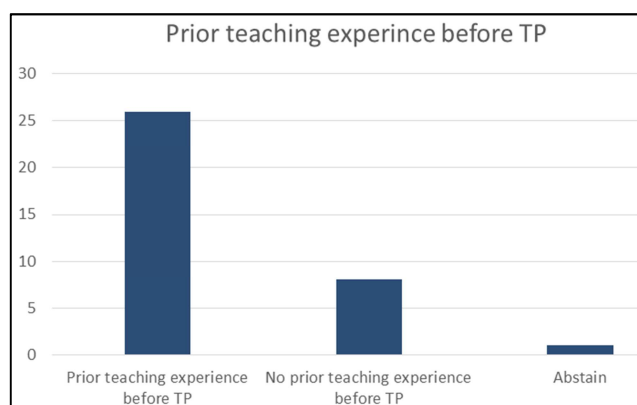

Figure 1. *Graph showing prior teaching experience of students.*

Prior teaching experience was one of the attributes which had to be considered. This experience would determine the depth of pedagogical support to students during TP. According to figure 1 above, majority of the students (74%) who responded to the questionnaire had prior teaching experience before TP. Although this experience was gained from primary schools which is lower as compared to this new TP environment (secondary school), this experience proved to be essential to TP in this new environment.
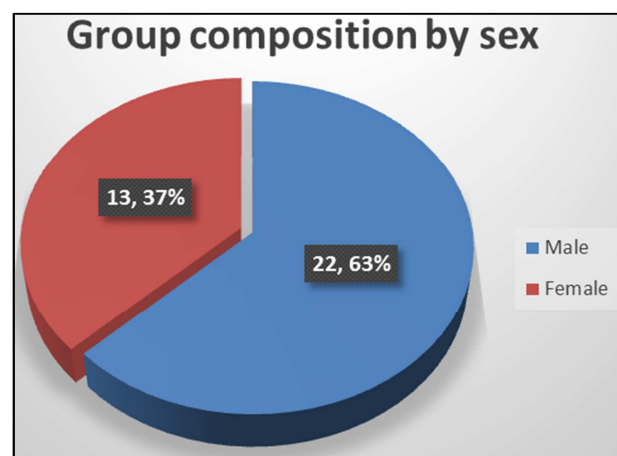

Figure 2. *Showing composition of male and female student.*

It was important to note that students who were on TP for this research are shown in figure 1 above by sex. More males and less females. At that time CODeL was not yet known by many.

4.1. On Student Support Experiences

4.1.1. Teaching Experiences

It was revealed that some preservice teachers doing Diploma in education at Mzuni ODeL had an experience in teaching before enrolling this program while others gained an experience without any formal training and very few abstained. Figure 4 below is a summary of those who had an experience in teaching before enrolling ODEL program while others had not.
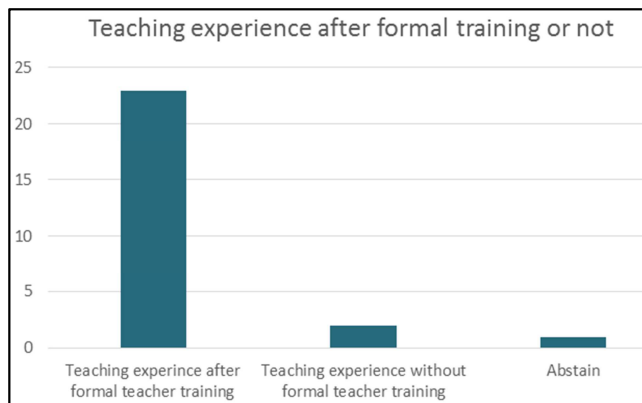
Figure 3. *Experience in teaching from formal training or not.*
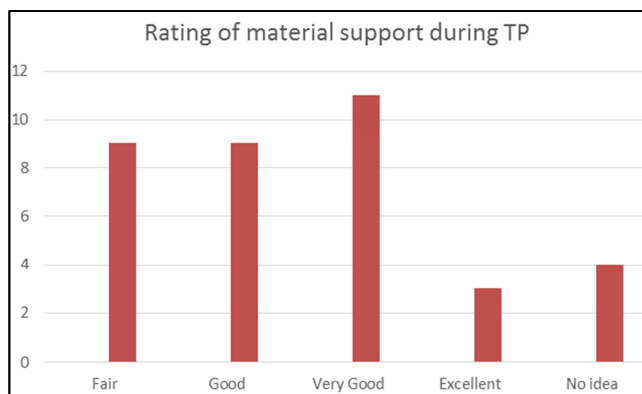

Figure 4. *Material (resources) support during TP.*

Lecturers and TP Coordinator revealed that students on training are supported in their training through conducting micro/peer teaching. Micro teaching refers to arbitrary and intensive lectures which are limited in contrast to lessons offered in classrooms [6]. Micro/peer teaching practice provides the student teachers with the opportunity to have teaching experience in a classroom-like teaching environment before teaching at the real classrooms [7]. However it was noted that since the period of doing micro/peer teaching was short some students did not do micro/ peer lessons effectively. However, the study found out that there is no much significant difference between those who had an experience in teaching lower primary schools to those without any teaching experience. This was further revealed due to the final assessment of the TP. Their results were in the range of 60% to 75% as noted from the same TP observation form score sheet.

4.1.2. Material (Resources) Support

ODEL policy on sponsorship says that students admitted into ODEL programme are admitted on a self-sponsorship basis which removes that mandate of instructional material support to them during TP. Instructional materials (resources) refer to those alternative channels of communication, which a classroom teacher can use to concretize a concept during teaching and learning process [8]. This has put schools under pressure to release instructional materials to TP students assigned to their school. Some students indicated that

instructional material support was very good (11 students out of 36) while 3 out of 36 said excellent, then 9 out of 36 students said good. This shows that there was some material support provided to students by schools and this must be conducted by all schools to ensure that learning is being supported as well.
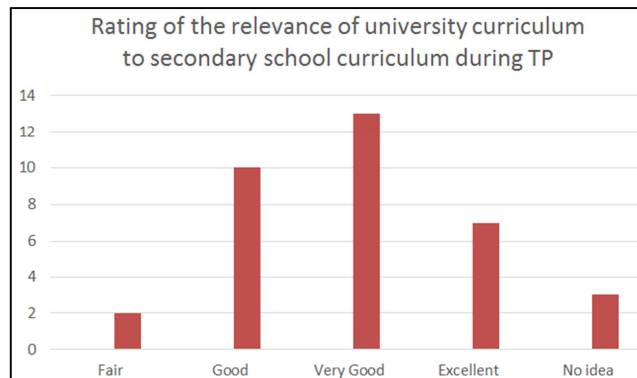

Figure 5. *Relevance of Curriculums.*

4.1.3. Secondary School and University Curriculums

The study wanted to find out from Head Teachers and University Methods Lecturers on the relevance of secondary and university curriculums.

All the head teachers and lecturers agreed that the curriculum for secondary school is used for training student-teachers. Lecturers narrated that most examples during their training at university are taken from the secondary school syllabus.

Lecturer A: *"I use examples from secondary school when presenting university course in methodology, since I am aware that students will be teaching in a secondary school class"*

This also concurs with headteacher x who said

"....When checking content from their schemes and records of work, lesson plans and textbooks there is correlation between the two curriculums…"

Since preservice teachers will be in secondary schools, then the university curriculum ensures that the courses in methodology must also consider the secondary school curriculum. This helps students to teach better in secondary school.

4.1.4. Cooperating Teachers Support

The study also revealed that cooperating teachers gave support to students on TP. Figure 8 below shows that there was support provided by cooperating teachers. Cooperating teachers are those teachers responsible for the class given to TP students. The analysis from figure 8 indicate that 7 out of 35 students observed that it was excellent support while 12 out of 35 student teachers said it was very good, 7 out of 35 said it was good, then 6 out of 35 said was fair and the rest i.e 3 said no idea.
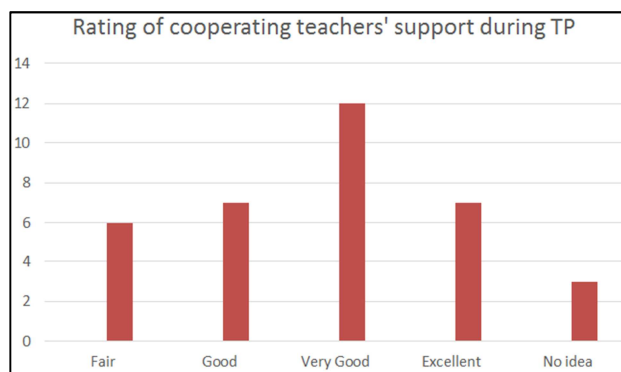
Figure 6. Cooperating Teachers Support.

The overall impression of the school administration where students did the teaching practicum looks good. This is the case because students were given an opportunity to choose schools where they would be comfortable. In most cases students chose schools closer to their homes, or their former schools or where they had relations. Due to this in-house knowledge student were able to relate with members of staff of TP schools amicably.
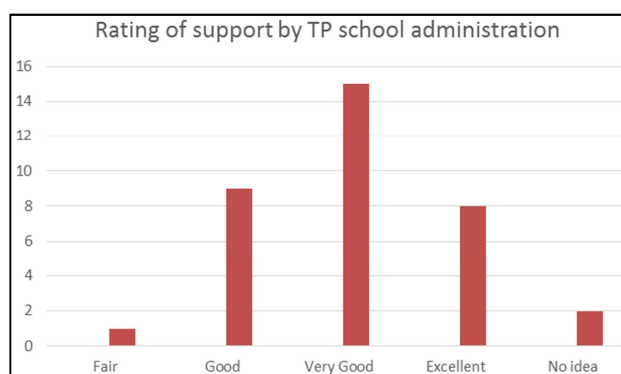

Figure 7. Support by school administration.

4.2. Challenges Experienced

4.2.1. On Instructional Material Support During TP

Preservice teachers were asked to indicate on a rating scale whether they received any instructional material support during TP.

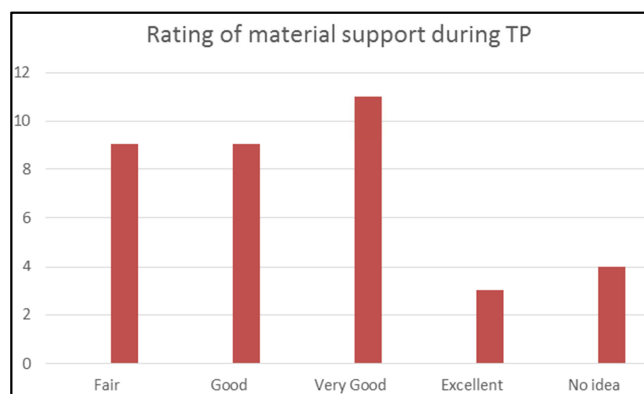The figure below shows that there were some disparities.

Figure 8. Material support during TP.

ODeL policy on sponsorship says that students admitted into ODeL programme are admitted on a self-sponsorship basis which removes that mandate of instructional material support to them during TP. Instructional materials refer to those alternative channels of communication, which a classroom teacher can use to concretize a concept during teaching and learning process [8] This has put schools under pressure to release instructional materials to TP students assigned to their school. Some students indicated that instructional material support was very good (11 students out of 36) while 3 out of 36 said excellent, then 9 out of 36 students said good. This shows that there was some material support provided to students by schools and this must be conducted by all schools to ensure that learning is being supported as well. However some schools always plead with the TP Coordinator to be providing students with teaching, learning and assessment resources since schools have also inadequate resources to support all teachers. The university has a role to play in supporting students with resources for effective TP.

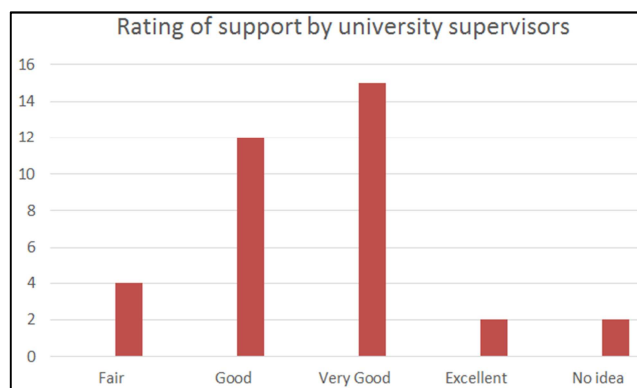### 4.2.2. On Support by University Supervisors

Figure 9. Support by University Supervisors.

The overall impression of support by the supervisors seems to be good according to the figure above. However, there are observations of fair rating which is an indication of unsatisfaction on the side of students. This is somehow related both to pedagogical as well as content knowledge issues. It has been indicated by a student respondent in the survey that "lecturers who are not specialists should not be allowed to supervise the subject in which they are not specialized". Another student respondent had had this to say "haphazard allocation victimizes innocent and competent teachers. Low grades given due to lack knowledge of what is required in a specific subject demotivates the student teacher". This of course does not indicate what the problem actually was which could be either lack of content knowledge by the supervisor or lack of knowledge of some pedagogical or methodological issues by the supervisor. Supervisors hold positions in teacher education that are crucial for professional preparation of teachers. They are expected to support students in ways that encourage them to be fully immersed in classroom situations and school contexts. Supervisors are also expected to provide students with a variety of opportunities to develop new skills, knowledge and

comprehension of teaching pedagogy, subject content matter, students, and the social environment of the schools [9].

Another respondent reported on the need for supervisors to be oriented before going on TP. Although observations on the ground indicate lack of standardization of the TP instruction, personal values and prejudices have proved to be difficult where it rests upon the discretion of the supervisor to judge whether the lesson was unsatisfactory, satisfactory or excellent.

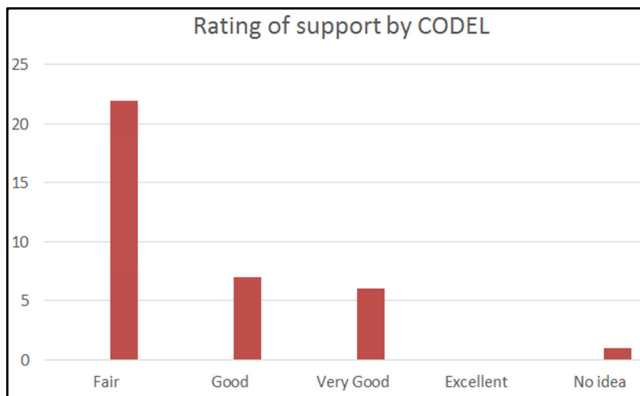### 4.2.3. On the Support by CODeL Administration

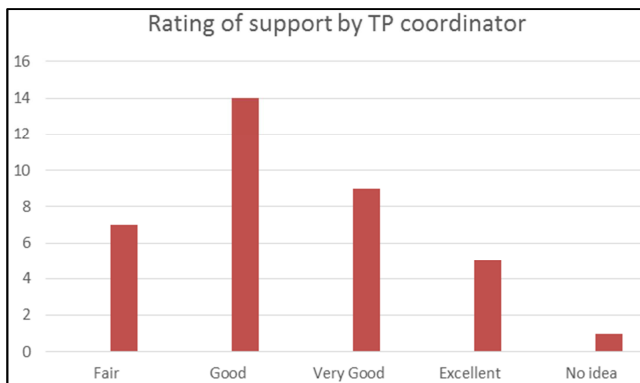*Figure 10. Support by CODeL administration.*

Figure 11. Support by TP Coodinator.

Poor rating of support by CODeL hinges on inadequacy of administrative support. According to the comments by the respondents, untimely release of examination results and late distribution of instructional modules were cited as areas where CODeL needs improvement. The issue of late distribution of instructional modules seems to directly fall in the hands of CODeL but unfortunately this is not the case. Due to a centralized mode of operation at Mzuzu university in which CODeL is infused into the main stream institution, institutional procedures of operations have to be adhered to which are so bureaucratic and this tends to frustrate and slow down some key operations in the University. One such component which is a key element in the structure of the University is the procurement unit. At times requisitions for procurement of materials for the production of instructional materials have been to the procurement unit only to be told that they were not given enough time to process the procurement of the materials. This means delays in the production of instructional materials.

Inadequate resources affect the implementation of inclusive education. Furthermore [10] recommends that adequate teaching and learning resources should be provided to ensure effective implementation of TP and more funds to be allocated for procuring teaching and learning materials.

On the issue of delays in release of examination results, this has been the case due to heavy workloads on lecturers since Mzuzu University is a dual mode institution in which academia handle two sets of students (face to face and ODeL).

Looking at the above observations, it seems both problems are beyond control of CODeL to some extent though a blame on administrative miscarriage could be put upon CODeL.

The other issue that led to the poor rating of CODeL support during the TP was the absence of financial, material support to TP students. This was indicated as one of the areas where CODeL should improve as far as TP is concerned.

Majority of students seems to rate the support by the TP coordinator as good. On the contrary, a few respondents had reservations which have been indicated by a "fair" rating. This is attributed to logistical challenges which the TP coordinator faced. These hinged on inadequate material and human resource which were a headache to the TP coordinator. Due to this challenge, there were variations in terms of number of supervisions made on each student as has been indicated by one respondent "supervision should be done a minimum of three time". Another respondent also noted that TP students were requested or ordered to arrange for a class outside the school time table which was an organisational challenge to them with other teachers at the TP school.

The other challenge with ODeL teaching practicum is that students are given an opportunity to choose schools of their liking for TP which would enable them (students) to fend for themselves. This however is seen as a logistical challenge to the TP coordinator who advises the students to change schools and allocate themselves in areas where they can easily be accessed by the supervisors. This is a challenge to ODeL students who do not receive any material or financial support during TP. This is based on a principle of self-sponsorship which necessitates that they fend for themselves as they do with the rest of their study expenses. This triggered a response from TP students that is appearing with highest frequency that they should be provided with financial and material support during teaching practicum.
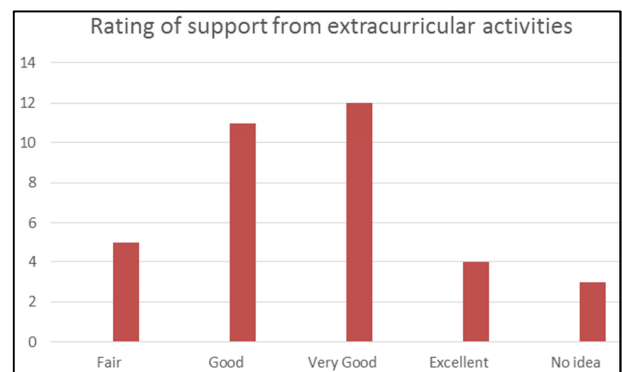

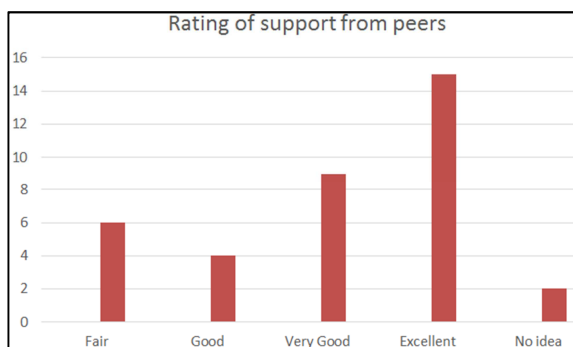
Figure 12. Extracurricular activities.
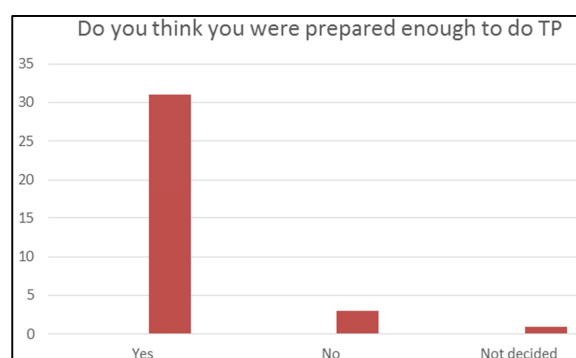
Figure 13. Support from peers.

Figure 14. Students Preparation prior to TP.

The overwhelming response of "yes" here gives an indication that students were subjected to enough technical skills or pedagogical knowledge before TP. This contradicts observations and comments on the ground which point out that there were some courses which were supposed to be done but were done after TP. One of the respondents says *"All Education Foundation (EDUF) courses should be done before TP. This is a good suggestion but by looking at the number of EDUF courses on offer, offering all such courses before TP would be a challenge. In this paper it is suggested that only crucial key courses that lean highly on classroom practice would be practical as one of the respondents observe "some subjects need to be covered before TP such as Testing and Measurement and General Teaching Methods".*

4.3. Effectiveness of Support to Achieve Individualised TP

The study looked at a number of important things to be conducted to ensure TP becomes more effective.

4.3.1. Intensify Micro/Peer Teaching

One student teacher clarifies that micro/peer teaching helps to gain experience before going into the actual classroom.

".…. if all methodology Lecturers intensify conducting micro/peer teaching with their students we can help secondary school learners learn better…"

Microteaching, a teacher training technique currently practiced worldwide, provides teachers an opportunity to perk up their teaching skills by improving the various simple tasks called teaching skills [11]. This helps to provide an opportunity for pre-service teachers to gain teaching experiences before

going to teach students in TP schools. Furthermore, during peer/micro teaching the student teacher prepares a lesson plan to be used in teaching. After the lesson presentation, other student teachers and their lecturer discuss what was observed as a means of providing feedback for further improvement of the lesson. Within a learning context, feedback is typically given in response to an instructional question or task and is intended to improve the learners' problem solving accuracy or conceptual understanding of the topic [12].

4.3.2. On the Support Through Pre- / Post-Conference

Data as shown from the figure below has revealed that the pre- and post-conferences conducted prior to classroom and after observation shows that most students find it useful.

Those students who say pre-teaching discussions were not useful at all or minimally useful, say so because pre-teaching discussions in most cases take place a few minutes before class. This gives practicing teachers little or no time to effect such suggestions or changes in their lesson plans. In some cases, pre-teaching discussions never take place. This happens due to late arrival at TP schools by supervisors argued in their study that teaching practice supervisors have a professional and moral obligation to ensure that their feedback to student teachers is aimed at building the students to become better teachers [13]. Consequently, supervisors need to ensure that they identify areas of concern to the student teacher and to provide the best possible opportunity for improvement in their performance.
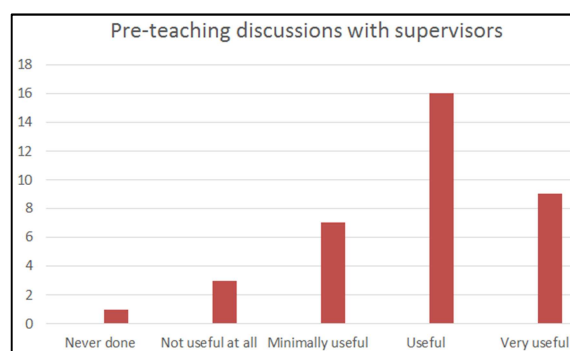

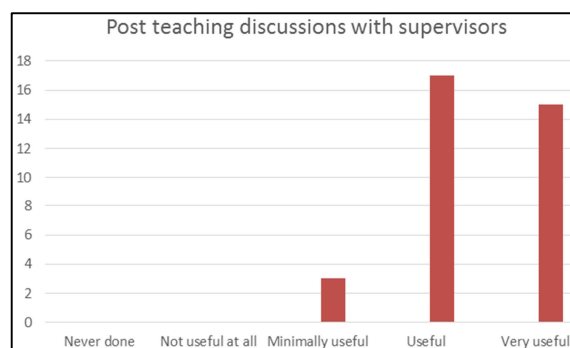
Figure 15. Pre-conference during TP.

Figure 16. Post conference during TP.

According to the figure above it is evident that post teaching discussions between university supervisors and practicing teachers has been rated useful. However, other students have

rated it as minimal usefulness. Lecturers observe and advise students during TP in order to stimulate students' growth in teaching and to obtain an overview of a student's teaching. They should also spent time discussing with students, any matters pertaining to their experiences. These lecturers should submit reports on observations and impressions during the TP session [14]. However there are a few cases where some lecturers do not follow proper items in the observation form. However due to lack of proper orientation on using the observation form prior to TP different supervisors carry with them different views into the classroom.

TP supervisors are lecturers who belong to different fields of study or specialization in terms of teaching/learning methodologies. Due to a human resource challenge, there are no strict adherence to a policy of lecturers in a specific methodology or disciplinary area to supervise a particular set of students.

4.3.3. Need for Sharing Professional Development

Cooperating teachers have a role to play in developing new skills for student teachers. However some did not provide the necessary support to student teachers. Even though some student teachers saw that cooperating teachers are useful others felt not important. One student had this to say when interviewed:

"…*We were not very welcome at school to observe a lesson by our cooperating teachers, some cooperating teachers said were not ready for that exercise…*"

New student teachers need interaction through classroom observation sharing notes about whatever happens in a classroom. The nature of interaction and activities are significant in the development of student teachers' professional knowledge and cognition (thinking and learning), as they are situated in the experiences with mentoring teachers [15]. It is further argued that the student experiences highlighted different mentors in schools, where some were willing to share their professional experiences, whilst others held the view that the exercise was to observing students teaching, without being firstly observed teaching by the students. The survey by [16] indicated that at the start of a practicum the dominant focus of student teachers was to understand the context in which they would be teaching. This was predominantly through observation, but included interacting with students, understanding policies, procedures and routines, and establishing relationships with students and associate

teachers. Observation from figure 17 below showing how student teachers rate their cooperating teachers. 17 student teachers out of 35 said it was useful, while the rest were not happy. This revealed that it depends on the school where TP was conducted and the behaviour of the cooperating teachers.
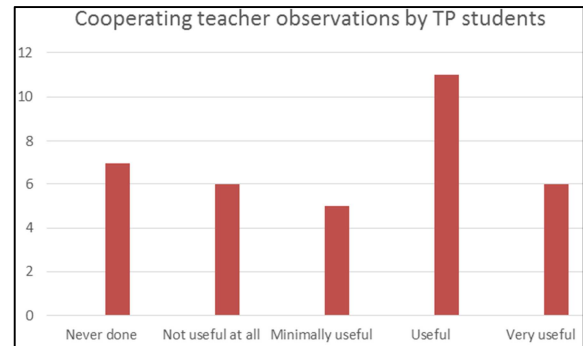

Figure 17. *Cooperating Teachers observations by TP students.*

5. Conclusion

The study focused on the question: Do the current teaching practicum enhance or inhibit individualised student support? How do the individualized support for ODeL student-teachers on teaching practicum be enhanced? and was guided by three sub-questions: What were the positive student support experienced by students during cohort2 teaching practicum? What challenges were experienced by students during teaching practicum? How could the support to teachers be effectively done to achieve individualised learning? By using an interview guide and a questionnaire to sampled target population it has been found out that even though there were some challenges observed in supporting student teachers, however this study has revealed that students were supported in very important areas required for conducting TP. Furthermore, the study has noted that for the sustainability of the TP exercise, CODeL administration and other stakeholders need to improve on the support given to TP students on those areas that are more challenging to achieve ididivalised learning. The study has established that an effective student support can lead to effective individualized learning during TP.
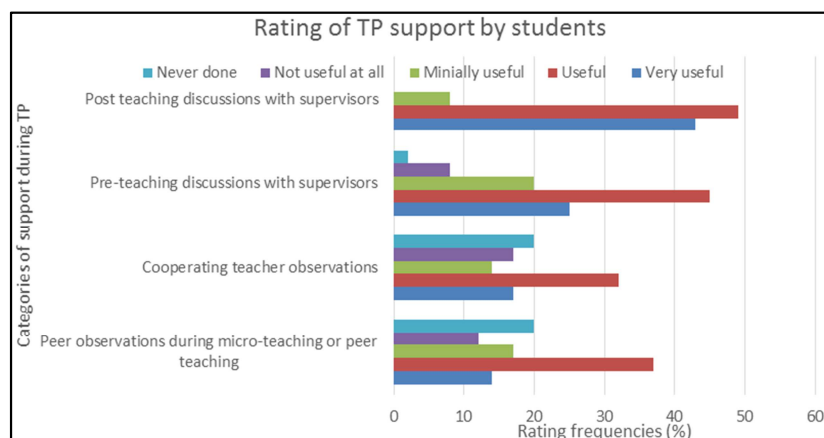
Figures 18 and 19 below conclude the study findings:

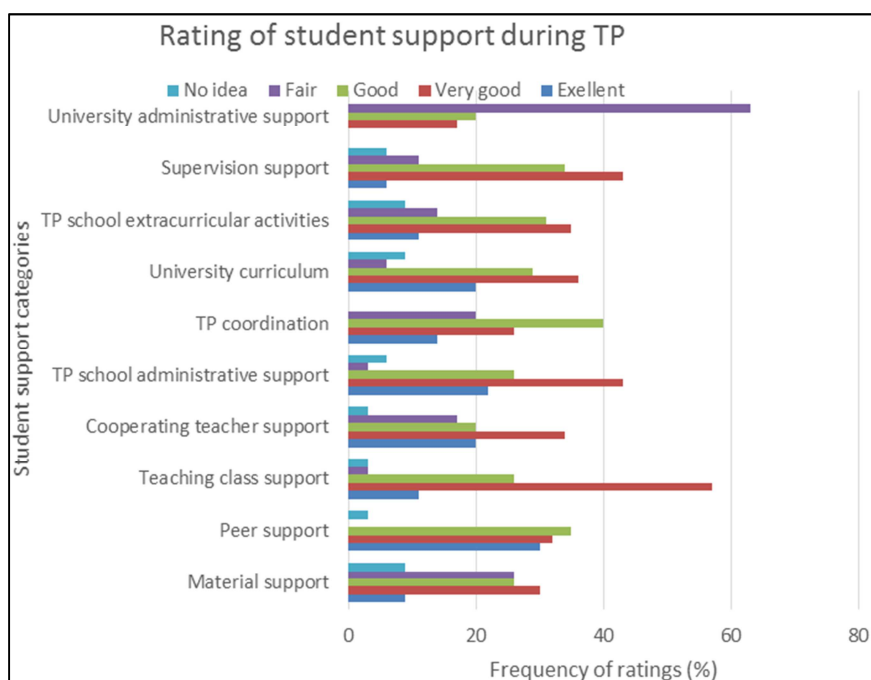***Figure 18.*** *General Rating of support during TP.*

Figure 19. *General Rating of Administrative support and others.*

It is noted from the graph that pre-service teachers feel that the support from university administration doesn't help them at all, it is more than 60% fair.. However teaching class support, supervision support, TP school administrative support, university curriculum cooperating teacher support seems to be very good but below 60% which is not adequate enough. This shows that more effort on this TP support need to be reviewed to ensure that preservice teachers develop necessary skills and knowledge for professional development. [1] argued that close contact and collaborations between universities and schools must improve student teachers' professional development in teaching practicum.

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