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An Assessment of the Practicum as a Professional Development Among Private Higher Education Institutions in Tigray

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Abstract

This study is an account of the one-year long practicum assessment as professional development at four private colleges in the Tigray Region. It aimed at assessing the organizational structures and implementation approaches of the practice based on the perception of selected trainees and college staff, and documents. The findings show that the respondents greatly value the opportunities the practicum offers to the student teachers for developing various personal and teaching concerns (professional skills). However, the organizational and practical aspects of the trade were heavily criticized on several grounds. Finally, effective partnership with other stakeholder, revision of evaluation procedures, regular supervision and the like were recommended to make the practice a more constructive professional development exercise.

I. Introduction

Currently, teacher training and development trends that contribute to the professionalization of teaching are sought by numerous sources. For example, before and after being qualified as a teacher Lefoka, Jobo and Moeti (2001) claim for innovating (generating) new insight of teacher education. They, moreover, stress the need to explore how student teachers acquire the skills to teach effectively, and how they experience training and induction into the teaching profession in actual contexts. To such ends, it is worth looking into analytical and practical concerns with the structural organization of teacher education programmes as well as the form and substance of their curricula (Ibid).

In the Ethiopian context, due attention is paid to the practicum as a more integrated professional development part of the pre-service teacher education programmes (MoE, 2003). It aims to enrich student teachers' practical experiences and their understandings of the teaching profession in a plenty of situations as earlier as the initial training (Ibid). The Ministry's National Curriculum Guide, moreover, recommends that teacher trainees be provided with the opportunities to practice teaching skills and methods in a structured, guided, and well-supported way through the concerted efforts of all the stakeholders in the trade. However, its organizational structures and implementation approaches might vary from one context to the other. In the Tigray Region, the In-Out-In teacher education structure aims at providing trainees with ample opportunities in which professional skills can be developed further and internalized over lengthy but uninterrupted periods of practical experience. Thus, student teachers are spread out in various Woredas of the Region during the entire period of their second year to practice teaching in actual schools.

Private higher education institutions take a lion's share in producing professional teachers in line with the proposed internship structure (model). Though there is no documented evidence, many aspects of the one-year practicum as a professional development exercise are often criticized by many parties. Trainees, for instance, are frequently heard complaining of minimal support received from their colleges and schools benefit more from the actual practicum. Such complaints and pitfalls can better be understood when organizational and practical aspects of the practicum as well as perceptions of those with an immediate stake in the practice are evaluated and analyzed. Yet, studies that aim to help private higher education sectors review and improve their practicum exercises are almost absent. This study, therefore, is an evaluative account of the practicum exercise at four private higher institutions engaged in training second cycle primary school teachers. It focuses on the 1998 one-year practicum program to assess the various organizational structures and practical approaches of the practice dwelling on the perceptions of the stakeholders and documents.

2. Objectives

The study, generally, aims at evaluating the part(s) a one year practicum plays in the professional development of trainees after an assessment of the practice at four private colleges in Mekelle city: Greenwich, Hashenge, New Millennium, and Sheba colleges. Special attention in the study has been provided to address the following questions:

1. Assess the organizational structures and implementation approaches employed in the practice;
2. Investigate the trainees' and the trainers' perception of the exercise;
3. Evaluate the immediate stakeholders view about the effectiveness of the internship.

3. Methodology

Primary data for the study was collected from selected student teachers (N=100) and teacher educators (N=20) via the questionnaire, and education department heads and vice deans via interviews. Besides, document analysis served as a source of information about the organizational aspects of the practicum. Data collected via such approaches were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics and narrative modes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Operational Structure and Organization

This section looks at the basic infrastructures and their organizational structures to serve as the building blocks of running the actual practicum among the selected institutions.

Operational Structure

As a more integrated professional development part of the teacher education program, the practicum should be institutionalized by itself with the necessary personnel and emphasis (Lefoka, Jobo, and Moeti, 2001; MOE, 2003). However, the interview responses of the key informants from the selected sectors revealed the absence of a separate department or office to coordinate and run the practicum in their respective colleges. They also pinpointed that the necessary processes and personnel are not well versed in the structure. The process of supervising and assisting student teachers with the required tutors/supervisors and coordinators have been hardly established or centralized both in the institution and partner schools. Thus, the current operational structure of the practicum among the institutions would appear to have hardly paved the way for the college tutors as well as school teachers to facilitate supervision for the professional development of the trainees.

4.1.2. Partnership with Schools

Schools take the lion's share in professional development of student teachers. To this end, Moorosi (1998) and Hopkin (1996) note that colleges need to set up training workshops to familiarize school principals and teachers with the importance of the practicum and the roles they play in helping the trainees. However, deans and heads reported that no training workshops were designed for schools and little attention has been paid to preparing principals and cooperating teachers to take on their roles, duties, and responsibilities of providing professional and social assistance to the trainees.

4.1.3. Placement and Orientation

In private higher education sectors, the system of allocating student teachers in schools tends to be difficult. The college staff informants indicated that their institutions usually

apply to the Woreda Education Offices to take in student teachers and place in schools. Since the offices are free to accept or reject to do so, some take the number of student teachers they want while most refuse to receive any trainees. In such instances, the student teachers, with the help of their institution are often urged to find host schools even without allowance/pay. The trainees' responses below support this problem.

Table 1: Student Teachers' Reaction to their School Placement

Item	Responses	Frequency
1. Who found and selected you the Wereda school for your practicum?	A. Myself	58
	B. My college	42
	C. Any other	-
2. Did you like/prefer it to learn a lot?	A. Yes	33
	B. No	67

From the above table, the majority of the trainees (58) were responsible to place themselves for their practice and a large number of them (67) did not like the placement sites for professional development opportunities. The responses would imply that the college tended to relinquish control over the placement to student teachers. Hence, schools were chosen for personal and availability reasons rather than sound standards whereby student teachers could get opportunities to experience the teaching profession.

It would also appear that colleges have exerted minimal effort to make strong and formal partnerships, clear terms of reference, and long term arrangements with Woreda Education Offices as the key stakeholders responsible for receiving and placing student teachers as well as initiating schools to provide professional and social support for the trainees.

Placement and orientation are often inseparable issues. In this regard, Ntho (1998) emphasizes the need for an open and democratic orientation to the practicum for student teachers to communicate their perceptions and expectations freely. When asked to reflect on the 1998 orientation to the practicum, the department heads and deans indicated that the

session focused on the institutional requirements and expectations that student teachers were to live with. Thus, the practicum orientation tended to be a contrived collegiality manifest by one-sided presentations that caused the trainees to listen to what was being communicated to them.

4.1.4. Assessment Structures and Procedures

The colleges have two procedures for evaluating their trainees on the practicum; the portfolio and school evaluation. Student teachers were asked to produce a portfolio of their school experiences and make short reflective presentations. The school evaluation is done for the purpose of final grading of the practicing trainees. The institutions have developed forms to be completed by schools and sent back to the colleges where the instructors add the scores to arrive at a final grade in conjunction with the portfolio scores.

However, the contents of the school experience portfolio and evaluation forms as well as the ways they have been structured appear to have been less well thought out. They could hardly serve as important tools for helping prospective teachers as well as other stakeholders to achieve the goals of the practicum by practicing the theory of teaching. There are no assessment procedures that guide student teachers in evaluating themselves and for assisting one another. The assessment procedures and structures are of minimal assistance in supporting the trainees to reflect on their teaching experiences and progress. They do not let tutors, cooperating teachers, and heads pay regular classroom visits that allow the professional development of the student teachers.

4.2. The Actual Practicum in Action and Trainees' Experiences

This part of the study is devoted to the practice of supervision and the support of schools in helping the student teachers grow professionally during the practicum. In effect, some of the ways through which the practicum was undertaken and experienced by the student teachers are assessed.

4.2.1. Supervision

Respondents were asked to reflect on and evaluate the supervision issues of the 1998 practicum.

Table 2: Trainees' Responses to the Number of Visits Made

Number of Visits	Responses
No visit	76
Once	15
Twice	9
Thrice	-
Four and above times	-
Total	100

The actual practicum, as a learning tool to teach developmental exercise, can be fruitful with an arranged and well-thought over supervision in which student teachers are visited sufficiently by college teacher trainers. However, from the above table, 76 of the students reported that they were not visited at all; while 15 reported only one visit and 9 reported two. There is an agreement amongst the respondents that the number of visits to give trainees regular professional support was totally inadequate.

Table 3: Trainees' Responses to Trainer (Tutor) Visits

How many different Trainers visited?	Responses
No trainer visited	69
The same trainer	17
Two different trainers	11
Three or more trainers	3
Total	100

In table 3, the majority of student teachers (69) indicated that they were not visited by any teacher trainer; and only 17 said they were visited by the same teacher trainer. Whereas very few, 11, reported they had two different visitors. The results suggest the absence or lack of tutor visits to offer professional support for trainees on practice.

Table 4: Trainees' Evaluation of Supervisory Feedback and Assistance

Type of supervisory feedback & assistance	Responses
No assistance	84
Given a grade	23
Written feed back	17
Verbal feedback	14
Observed-but no feedback	12

Student teachers were asked to reflect on the types of assistance they were given through supervision. The table shows that most of the trainees, 84, received no assistance. Supervisory feedback and assistance given to the trainees appeared very minimal. Both written and verbal feedback was uncommon. Student teachers were very rarely observed and given no feedback at all, frequently not told grades awarded.

Moreover, the instructors' views were in favour of the trainees'. They suggested the lack of an arranged and well-thought over supervision in which trainees were visited, given regular feedback, and their progress noted. They attributed the problem to transport and time constraints as well as poor college-school partnerships.

Thus, it could be inferred that the practical organization of the practicum in the college militated against sound supervision as a developmental exercise in which trainees are supported by college tutors and experienced school teachers.

4.2.2. Induction and Teaching Loads

This section looks at student teachers' evaluation of the schools' efforts in creating a supportive environment and introducing the trainees to teaching in supported as well as phased ways. When trainees start to practice teaching, they assume new responsibilities and face some problems when not prepared in advance (Good and Brophy, 1996; Goodson 1992).

Thus, Huling-Austin (1986) recommends induction programmes in schools to enhance trainees' personal and professional well-being or self-esteem.

Yet, most trainees commented that the schools did not create a supportive environment where the former could start to be introduced in the profession and the community. They complained about being left alone to cope, treated as children, and ignored or criticized. Besides, they were made to teach other subjects and more periods a week (20-30) as 43 trainees reported a teaching load of 20-24 periods, and 57 reported 25-30 periods.

4.2.3. Teaching Concerns / Professional skills

Teachers need to develop teaching concerns to deal with various issues at some stage. Fuller & Bown (1975) and Good & Brophy (1996) note that novice and student teachers must be assisted to work through and develop different personal as well as procedural teaching concerns before they pay attention to the effects of teaching and student learning. Thus, since novices and trainees-in -practice with different needs and skills react to teaching differently, the professional assistance they received from schools during the practicum.

An analysis of the level of their professional development rests on recognition of this variation (Glassberg, 1980; Good & Brophy, 1996). Thus, trainees' views of their practicum experience help to assess such issues. Student teachers were asked to reflect on their difficult experiences involved in some teaching concerns, and evaluating

Table 5: Student Teachers' Reaction to Some Teaching Concerns and the Support of Schools

Teaching Concerns	Difficulty Level			SCHOOL ASSISTANCE		
	iffi	Moderate	Easy	No Help	Some Help	Enough Help
Scheming	29	54	17	74	18	8
Lesson planning	13	29	58	69	20	11
Record keeping	16	29	55	63	23	14
Deciding on proper teaching method	63	21	16	77	16	7
Classroom control/Discipline	77	11	12	81	16	3
Motivate students	22	53	25	72	19	9
Dealingwith individual differences	74	16	10	79	15	6
Assessing Learners	23	51	26	65	23	12
Communicate parents	19	20	61	68	19	13
Ability to express oneself	20	24	56	77	18	5
Content Knowledge	59	17	24	62	28	10
Finding proper teaching materials	56	19	25	67	20	13

From the table above it can be seen that the most serious problem/difficulty reported by the trainees was classroom discipline management. The next salient difficulty observed was dealing with individual differences among students. Other frequently reported problems

were use of appropriate teaching methods, content knowledge, finding proper teaching materials. Besides, a significant number of trainees face moderate difficulty to produce schemes of work, motivate students, and assess learners.

Moreover, schools are valuable sources of rich learning opportunities for student teachers to develop professional skills. As Veenman (1984), Zeichner and Tabachnicck (1984/5), Hart (1995), and Good and Brophy (1996) pointed out, experienced and successful teachers, mentors and principals are responsible for helping trainees adjust to their roles in schools and develop professional skills as well as skills in collegiality and in learning about themselves through regular observation and feedback. However, the responses in the table show that the majority of trainees had no support from school to enrich their different teaching concerns or professional skills; only few felt they received help. This would suggest the poor partnerships between colleges and schools. The college staff informants tended to confirm the views of the trainees. The instructors and the department heads seemed to be doubtful whether the schools provide trainees with the necessary professional support. Most suggested that the quality of school experience was less than satisfactory as schools were not selected on the basis of their good teaching.

4.2.4. Merits Obtained During the Practicum

Respondents were asked to figure out and comment on the most important things during the actual practicum. Despite the paucity of support from schools and colleges, the respondents suggested the following personal and professional skills experienced during the practice:

- Blackboard organization and use;
- The need for patience and sensitivity while managing young children;
- Difficulties in handling and teaching young learners;
- The importance of cooperation with teachers, students and the community;

- Active participation in staff meetings;
- Opportunities to prepare real lesson plans, records on works done, mark a registrar, set and mark tests/exams, select teaching materials, choose effective teaching methods;
- Chances to learn so as to survive.

In a nutshell, the overall analysis of the responses would indicate that the practicum helped students acquire useful practical skills that they had been taught in college and put into practice on the job. This would appear to vindicate the need for an adequate period for the trainees to be on the practicum to learn, at different stages, different things from actual school situations that include mainly the real professional skills of handling the classroom, how to operate as a member of the school the community as well as the technical and administrative angles of teaching. The responses would also imply that the trainees' professional attitudes were good.

4.2.5. Problems During the practicum

Respondents were asked to reflect on the problems encountered during the practicum and comment on the following challenges which revolve around the schools, the colleges, money and resources. The responses are summarized as follows.

- Not being welcomed on the part of the staffs in schools they went for practicum;
- Viewed as inexperienced;
- School teachers' unwillingness to help and give professional support ;
- Uncooperative school principals ;
- Minimal chances to participate in workshops;
- Little or almost no payment;
- Low probability in appropriately know individual students so as to help them due to large class size;
- Teaching of different subjects that lead to many lesson preparations a week;

- Students' failure to grasp the content due to poor foundation;
- Inadequate college and school supervisor;
- Handling of students with undesirable behavior;
- Unreliable and less valid evaluation assessment system to measure trainees' competences.

4.2.5. Respondents' Views of the Practicum

This part looks at respondents' perceptions of the two-semester practicum: Its duration, what they felt trainees had learnt, and what frustrated them. Under normal circumstances, one-year block practicum is meant for student teachers to adequately put into operation what they have learned in colleges, and experience the demands of working in classrooms and schools. Trainees were asked to react to this lengthy and uninterrupted period of experience.

Table 6: Student Teachers' Views on the Length of the Practicum

Length	Responses
Right length	21
Be longer	2
Be shorter	58
In two blocks	19
Total	100

As shown in the above table, the great majority of the trainees felt that the time spent on the practicum should to be shorter. As few numbers of them felt either it should be broken in two blocks or it should continue as it had been. The great majority of the trainees who felt the time spent on the actual practicum needs to be reduced tended to reflect their own views. They, in the first place, perceived that the practicum is a process meant to help them practice but not necessarily to make them perfect. Secondly, they held that they benefited

little from it due to the lack or absence of professional support and sound assessment from their institutions and the hosting schools. They also complained of the overloaded teaching periods for two semesters with little or no payment.

By the same token, college staffs involved in the study were in favor of the trainees' perceptions regarding the reduction of the practicum period.

4.2.7. Follow up Discussion after the Practicum Return

Respondents were asked to look back and comment on how often the practicum experiences were followed up and discussed in the core courses in the institutions after the trainees returned from their respective practicing schools. Their reactions are given in the table below.

Table 7: Trainees' Responses to the Frequency of the Practicum Follow up Discussion in College Classes

Frequency	Responses
Several times	11
Some times	14
Once	18
Never	57

Most responses in the table would suggest the trainees' practicum experiences were never discussed after they return. It would seem that no project work or assignment in other courses was linked to the practicum due to the loose integration of the college courses with the experiences in real (actual) classrooms. The instructors also suggested that the practicum exercises were not closely integrated into the curriculum so that follow-up discussions did not occur in the colleges afterwards. This would imply the emphasis placed

on content during the final training year so that there was less room whereby the trainees' teaching concerns/professional skills were related further to the actual school context and enriched.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Drawing on the perceptions of the respondents and document analysis, the practical and organizational aspects of the year-long practicum at four private colleges in Tigray have been discussed. The findings of the study indicated that the respondents greatly valued the program as a challenging and rewarding experience in which trainees' learn to teach before joining the profession as full-fledged teachers. The trainees felt that they experienced extra-mural activities in the schools as well as the practical, technical, and administrative sides of teaching. However, the respondents were very critical of its organization and implementation. The study found several problems peculiar in the system affecting the main objectives of the program. Thus, it came up with the following major problems inherent in the operational structure, administration, and practice of the original year-long practicum.

- The program tended to have low status within the institutions as it was not run by a separate department/office.
- Trainee placement appeared fairly disorganized as the colleges hardly made long-term arrangements with Woreda education offices to select sound partnerships.
- College and school visits for supervisory and assessment functions were so limited that trainees were not supported to develop their skills.
- The assessment and evaluation structures and procedures seemed fairly weak to measure the trainees' various competences by the relevant role players via different forms over a reasonable period of time.

- The respondents' perceptions posited a wide gap between the colleges and the schools. The trainees' complaints of the treatment and support from schools would show the lesser role of the schools to serve as partners in the training. This also suggests poor preparation on the part of the institutions to make closer links and create effective partnership with schools so that they can understand and complement each other.
- Trainees' dissatisfaction with their experiences of the teaching concerns and the lack of follow up discussions after the practicum reveal the weak link between the practicum, and the school contexts. Consequently, people who participated in the study have criticized the practice on various grounds related to organizational and practical variables and it should be shorter. Dwelling on the respondents' suggestions and the study findings, the following recommendations are suggested to make the practicum a much more valuable and constructive professional development experience.
- Regional education bureaus and woreda education offices' enhanced assistance to the private higher education sector in their teacher education endeavors.
- Establishment of the practicum department/office and allocation of the personnel.
- Improved relations between colleges and other stakeholders, and enhanced liaison with schools, including workshops for mentor, heads, and principals.
- More efforts are needed on the part of institutions to integrate practicum with the rest of the curriculum and school context.
- Selection of schools that can offer models of good practice and support trainees.
- Better arrangements of visits for supervisory and assessment purposes.
- Revision of the assessment structures and procedures (the need to use various evaluation instruments for all concerned parties to assess trainees' competences.
- Institutions' efforts to develop understanding and collaboration for the same trade.

- Stakeholders' consensus up on a common set of guidelines about the structure and content of the practice.
- Colleges' and schools' enhanced efforts to set out realistic objectives about the trainees' expectations during the practicum.
- Enhancement of the research tradition in the education sector to evaluate and improve teacher training program.

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