

College tutors' perceptions of the source of bias in teaching practice assessment in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examines the source of bias in teaching practice assessment. Following a descriptive survey design, the researchers utilized a questionnaire to solicit views of a random sample of fifty-one college tutors working in three primary teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe. College tutors generally regard bias as highly prevalent in teaching practice assessment. In specific terms, college tutors routinely deviate from criteria of assessment as indicated on schedules of assessment, privileging factors entirely irrelevant to teaching effectiveness. It also came to light that inexperienced tutors tend to be particularly prone to bias when assessing teaching practice. The study recommended team assessment whereby more experienced tutors work with their less experienced counterparts as a way of mitigating bias in assessment of teaching practice. Additionally, the study calls for fostering continuous dialogue among college tutors on the interpretation of criteria of teaching practice assessment through seminars and workshops.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, college tutors, assessment, teaching practice, bias.

Introduction

There is general agreement among scholars that assessment is an important yet a problematic aspect of most learning programs (Taras 2005, Brooker, Muller, Mylonas, and Hansford, 1998: 6). Assessment is potentially beneficial to learning if it is properly conducted. The usefulness of assessment in educational settings in general mainly depends on the extent to which its criteria are consistent with objectives of a learning program Wong 2007, Vos (2000:227). Thus where the criteria of assessment deviate from the objectives of the learning program, assessment tends to be invalid, thereby detracting from its potential usefulness.

From the above argument it is clear that assessment can make or break a learning program. Where criteria is consistent with course objectives, assessment can serve the role of providing learners and institutional authorities with useful information on the progress being made towards the attainment of program objectives (Cowan, 2009). In this way assessment provides the informational basis for identifying and understanding the gaps in performance, enabling timeous decision-making regarding what and how much needs to be done so as to achieve the objectives of the learning program. In the same connection, assessment can also motivate learners to direct effort towards tasks that are relevant to the objectives of the learning program, as Ramsden (cited in Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, and Rust, 2010:2) suggests.

Where assessment criteria deviate from the objectives of a learning program, assessment can have negative impact, detracting from the quality of the learning program (Gibbons and Chevalier, 2008). By emphasizing certain factors that are not seen as important in a learning program, assessment may fail to give learners useful feedback. In fact it misdirects learners in terms of the requirements of the learning program. As a result learners will invest effort in performance tasks that have nothing to do with the objectives of the learning program. In the same connection, Knight (Price *et al.* 2010: 2) aptly notes that assessment is the 'Achilles heel of quality', implying that assessment is the weakest and delicate component of a learning programme which needs to be handled with utmost caution.

In light of what has been said above, suggestions in literature that teaching practice assessment in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe is not being carried out properly represent a legitimate occasion for concern. Chiromo (1999) suggests that there are many areas of conflict in the assessment of teaching practice, hence the need for standardization. This suggests that there is no common framework for teaching practice assessment in Zimbabwe, with different players interpreting the criteria of assessment differently. The same point was also made by Zindi (1996). Taruvinga (1996: 102) notes that college tutors tend to be more preoccupied with awarding marks than helping student teachers learn to teach. Through such practices college tutors pass up an opportunity to use assessment as a tool to enhance student teacher learning. Such assessment practices betray lack of understanding of criteria of teaching effectiveness on the part of the

college tutor. It can therefore be reasonably surmised that college tutors focus exclusively on the mark because they have no feedback to offer to the student. If this is true then one may wonder how they arrive at the mark. Given this scenario, it may not be unreasonable to suspect that the college tutors may be conducting assessment of teaching practice in an impressionistic and global way, not following set criteria on the assessment instrument.

What has been noted above implies that there may be bias in the assessment of teaching practice in Zimbabwe. Some studies point towards the existence of bias in teaching practice assessment in teachers' colleges and schools in Zimbabwe. In a research study on the assessment of teaching effectiveness among qualified teachers in Zimbabwean schools, Nhundu (1999:49) established the existence of bias in the ratings. What may be happening in schools may be reasonably expected to generally reflect the situation obtaining in the colleges since college lecturers are appointed from their teaching posts in the schools. In a related study, Zindi (1996: 28) also found out that student teachers on teaching practice in Zimbabwe generally considered teaching practice assessment as subjective and biased.

Given the detrimental implications of improperly done assessment on learning as pointed out above, bias in teaching practice assessment in teachers' colleges needs to be mitigated and controlled. Admittedly, assessment by its nature is inherently subjective; hence it may not be possible to eliminate bias. However such subjectivity should be managed and kept at a level that does not endanger the quality and credibility of the teacher preparation program. In order to make informed decisions regarding ways of mitigating and managing the bias, there is need to understand the source and extent of such bias. That is why this study sought to answer the following major question:

What is the source of bias in teaching practice assessment in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe?

Literature review

Concept of assessment

Perrone (1991: 24) sees assessment as '... a process of gathering information to meet a variety of evaluation needs'. Thus assessment

essentially involves collecting data relating to content of a learning program such as knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs. The information collected through assessment is seen as necessary for evaluation of the learning process to take place. In this view, assessment is located in a means - end relationship with evaluation, with the former being carried out to make the latter possible. Highlighting this view, Taras (2005: 467) similarly describes assessment as '... mechanics or steps required to make a judgement'. The same view of assessment is shared by Malderez and Wedell (2007: 146) who consider assessment to be a process '...which involves gathering evidence of some kind on which to base judgements'.

However, separating assessment from evaluation gives an impression that the former does not involve making judgements. Far from that, assessment also involves exercise of judgement in relation to how student performance has gone towards satisfying the criteria of learning. Thus both evaluation and assessment involve judgement, but what differentiates the two is the degree of judgement, the point in the learning process and the purpose of the judgement. Assessment and evaluation are therefore only different in degree, not in kind or substantive terms. Demonstrating that assessment involves judgement, the Webster Online dictionary describes assessment as having to do with '...determining the importance, size, or value of something'. Emphasising the close relationship between assessment and evaluation, Vos (2008: 288) observes that in some context the two words are used interchangeably.

Forms of assessment

Literature analysis reveals two major forms of assessment, namely formative and summative assessment. Summative and formative assessment are distinguished by reference to the time frame over which assessment activities take place as well as the purpose to which assessment is put (Tang 2008). Summative assessment is usually conducted at one point in time, normally at the end of a course of study or project (Cowan 2009; Taras 2005)). This suggests that summative assessment is more likely to be an event than a process (Keith and Brown, 2004:169). Summative assessment therefore relates to the grading of learners' work and involves the final decision-making regarding the quality of the student's work in relation to ultimate qualifying criteria (Taras 2005:468). Since summative assessment is primarily concerned with awarding grades, it is sometimes referred to as Assessment of Learning (AoL) (Cowan 2009). Formative

assessment unfolds over a longer time frame, occurring throughout the duration of a course or programme of learning. In this view, formative assessment is more process-oriented than its summative counterpart. Thus, the information collected as part of assessment activities is seen in the broader context of potentially enabling the learner to adjust appropriately to the learning process (Taras, 2005). Hence, formative assessment involves using the information gathered as a basis for giving feedback to the learner and monitoring the progress of learning. Describing formative assessment, the Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia notes that it is carried out throughout the course, giving feedback to the learner, not necessarily for grading purposes. Because of its potential capacity for enhancing learning, formative assessment is sometimes called Assessment for Learning (AfL) (Cowie 2005: 137).

Assessment, whether formative or summative takes two major approaches, namely norm-referenced and criterion referenced, and ipsative. According to Brooker *et al* (1998: 6-7) criterion-referenced assessment refers to '... the grading of a student's work or performance against one or more pre-specified criteria and aims to determine the status of a student with respect to some well-defined objectives'. Criterion-referenced assessment compares learner's performance against certain factors which are considered to be relevant to course objectives. Each of these criterion is broken into levels of performance into which the student's performance is categorised. The process of placing of the learner's performance into levels of performance involves some degree of judgement as to the worth of student's performance, making assessment an inherently subjective undertaking. Criterion-referenced assessment ranks participants according to performance. In this connection, the criterion-referenced framework of assessment makes it possible for one to tell what a learner with a given level of performance is supposed to know. Norm-referenced assessment, on the other hand, does not seek to compare individual performance against pre-set criteria. Rather, it seeks to establish where the learner's performance is in relation to other learners. The student's ranking does not indicate performance in relation to some absolute criteria, rather it shows where the individual learner is in relation to others who attempted to complete the same task. This study is mainly concerned with assessment of teaching practice in Zimbabwean primary teachers' colleges, which tends to be predominantly formative and criterion-referenced.

Assessment of teaching practice

Like in all learning programs, assessment also occupies a central place in teacher education programs (Tang 2008; Taras 2005). One of the aspects of teacher education programs in which assessment plays a potentially useful role is teaching practice, provided it is properly conducted. If not conducted properly, assessment not only detracts from its potential utility to learning of student on teaching practice, but also undermines the learning that should be taking place. This is the reason why one has legitimate cause to be worried when there are suggestions that teaching practice in Zimbabwe teachers' training colleges is not being conducted properly. If this is the case the quality of learning of the prospective teachers and consequently teacher quality will be compromised in the long run. This scenario is not confined to Zimbabwe. Scholars note that internationally, trainee teachers regard teaching practice as the most significant component of their training yet it is one aspect of the course with which they are most dissatisfied (Brooker *et al.*, 1998: 6). This dissatisfaction primarily stems from the way assessment of the teaching practice is carried out. Several things can go wrong with assessment of teaching practice. Teaching practice assessment necessarily occurs on the basis of criteria which should capture the program's conception of an ideal teacher. However, oftentimes it is difficult for people to have consensus about this, let alone clarity about the criteria. Thus the fuzzy and unclear criteria of assessment often make life difficult for assessors, resulting in them conducting assessment on the basis of global criteria. This leaves room for impressionistic assessment where criteria that have little to do with teaching effectiveness are prioritized during teaching practice assessment. Brooker *et al.* (1998:8) similarly observe that problems in assessment of teaching are centered on what to assess.

In Zimbabwe, trainee teachers on teaching practice are jointly assessed by college tutors, mentors, school heads and teachers-in-charge. As scholars point out, there is often lack of consensus when it comes to interpreting the schedules of assessment among these groups of personnel. This lack of a common framework for assessment may lead to contradictory expectations being communicated to the student teachers. If this happens, then students will not know what to do in order to meet the requirements of the course. Taras (2005) observes that lack of clarity and consensus about what to assess often undermines the purpose of a learning program. Although it is

generally acknowledged in literature that objective assessment is not possible, it is equally worthwhile to seek a common framework for assessment through working out some degree of consensus about what ought to be assessed (Taras 2005). This is so because such an assessment process will be able to communicate clear and relatively consistent expectations to the student teachers. On the basis of that information, students will be able to appropriately adjust their performance in ways that enhance attainment of learning outcomes (Cowan 2009).

Categories of inquiry from literature

This study drew extensively on insights from research in social psychology. Classical research in social psychology suggests that subtle characteristics such as physical attractiveness, gender, age and socio-economic status affect initial impressions formed by others (Dion, Berscheid and Walster 1972). It is on this basis that the researchers in this study decided to use such factors as initial categories of inquiry. The questionnaire used in this study therefore sought to find out from the respondents the extent to which the following factors influenced their assessment decisions: social class, prior knowledge, gender, personal attractiveness, and gifts. However, these categories of inquiry were treated as open-ended and flexible, not precluding the possibility of more factors being raised by the respondents. To cater for this possibility, the researchers included an 'Others' category.

Writing about the influence of social class-related factors to assessment, Darley and Gross (1983) observed that a student's socio-economic status influenced judgment of his or her performance in scholastic ability tests. In his study, the researcher interpreted social class in terms of a cluster of material and socio-cultural characteristics relating to observable symbols of socio-economic location, acquired on the basis of family background or other socio-economic affiliations. Such symbols of social class include the quality of dress, language, demeanor, and deportment. In the intersubjective space where the college tutor interacts with a student for the purposes of assessment, literature suggests that such social class identity may arguably shape the tutor's estimation of a student's classroom behavior.

In this study, prior knowledge relates to the question of whether the college tutor and the student are acquainted with each other on the basis of having

had prior interaction in other contexts outside the one of assessment. This factor is closely related to what social psychologists such as Cooper (1981) call the halo effect. Fiske and Taylor's (cited in Bradley, 1984) work on the schematic bases of social information processing provides much evidential anchorage to the possible influence of prior knowledge on assessment decisions. These scholars argue that prior knowledge of a target of assessment influences judgment of the target's subsequent performance. In this regard, characteristics of a student as revealed in a previous context of interaction with the assessor may shape judgement of the student's current performance. This acquaintance may work for good or worse for the student in the intersubjective space of assessment.

Prior knowledge is closely related to another category of inquiry used in the questionnaire for this study, namely; gifts. Gifts relate to whether the tutor as assessor has had prior interaction with the respondent where gifts were exchanged or promised, directly or indirectly. This category also encompasses a scenario where the tutor acts in a certain way in anticipation of material benefit even though such benefit has not been suggested by the student.

Another factor seen as a possible source of bias in assessment is the personal attractiveness of the student. In a ground-breaking finding they called 'Beautiful is goodness thesis', Dion, Bercheid and Walster (1972) established that participants had a tendency to rate individuals whom they regarded as attractive as being more competent and more likely to succeed. In the same regard, studies by Clifford (1975) and Ritts, Patterson and Tubbs (1992) showed that teachers have a tendency to rate students they regard as attractive more favorably in intelligence and social skills.

Following suggestions in literature that the gender of the assessee influences performance rating, the researchers in this study decided to use gender as another category of inquiry on the questionnaire. In this connection, Golberg (1968) noted that work purportedly written by females tended to be rated more highly than that attributed to males. Bradley (1984) came to a similar conclusion, with respect to project marking, when he noted that where the marker was aware of the gender of the student, female projects tend to be given higher marks. Did this have anything to do with the gender of the marker? From the foregoing, it thus becomes clear why it is necessary to mitigate and manage bias in the assessment of teaching practice in

Zimbabwe. This study therefore sought to establish the source of bias in teaching practice assessment in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive survey design. The need to cover a population spread over a wide geographical area necessitated the use of such a design. Such scope of coverage was necessary to increase the application range of the findings. Fifty-one college tutors drawn from three primary teachers' colleges located in three provinces in Zimbabwe participated in the study. In the researchers' considered view, college tutors are best placed to provide information on teaching practice assessment. The multi-stage random sampling technique was used at several levels to select the target provinces, colleges and the tutors in colleges. Sixty self-completion questionnaires were distributed by the researchers in person to the different colleges. Delivering the questionnaire in person allowed the researchers to negotiate consent with the respondents in a face-to-face context. Perhaps, this may have enhanced the return rate of the questionnaires, which stood at 85%.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended items, although the former were more preponderant. In specific terms, the content of the questionnaire centered on two issues, namely; the extent to which lecturers deviate or adhere to criteria on the schedule of assessment when they go on teaching practice assessment and the factors contributing to such bias. The content of the questionnaire was guided by factors that influence teaching practice assessment as suggested in literature.

Results

Bio-data

Bio-data show that most college tutors (56.9%) at the three teachers' colleges are fairly new to the profession, with less than five years of lecturing experience. In contrast, only 9.8 % have more than twenty years lecturing experience. Relatedly, 23.5% have between six to ten years lecturing experience. Additionally, the bio-data show that most of the respondents held some positions in the colleges, with 41% being heads of sections, 19.6% lecturers-in-charge, and 9.8% heads of departments. Only 25.5% indicated that they held no posts.

Factors influencing teaching practice assessment: views of college tutors

Table 1. Factors influencing teaching practice assessment at college A (n=51)

Factor	Affects	Does not affect	Affects to a limited extent	Undecided
S/ C	8(57.2%)	2(14.3%)	2(14.3%)	2(14.3%)
P/ K	8(57.2%)	1(7.2%)	4(28.6%)	1(7.2%)
G/ R	6(42.9%)	1(7.2%)	4(28.6%)	3(21.4%)
P/ A	6(42.9%)	4(28.6%)	2(14.3%)	2(14.3%)
Gifts	10(71.4%)	2(14.3%)	2(14.3%)	0
Other	0	0	0	0

S/C-Social Class, P/K- Prior Knowledge, P/A- Personal Attractiveness, G/R-Gender

Table 1 shows that most college tutors see teaching practice assessment as biased, with different factors accounting for the following percentages, namely; social class (57.2%), prior knowledge (57.2%), gender (42.9%), personal attractiveness (42.9%), gifts (71.4%), other (0%).

Table 2. Factors influencing teaching practice assessment at college B (n=17)

Factor	Affects	Affects to a limited extent	Does not affect	Undecided
S/C	16(94.1%)	1(5.9%)	0	0
P/K	16(94.1%)	1(5.9%)	0	0
G/R	14(83.4%)	2(11.8%)	0	0
P/A	11(64.7%)	6 (35.3%)	0	0
Gifts	12(70.6%)	5(29.4%)	0	0

Table 3. Factors influencing practicum assessment at college C (n=20)

Factor	Affects	Affects to a limited extent	Does not affect	Undecided
S/C	19(95%)	1(5%)	0	0
P/K	19(95%)	0	1(5%)	0
G/R	16(80%)	2(10%)	2(10%)	0
P/A	18(90%)	1(5%)	1(5%)	0
Gifts	18(90%)	2(10%)	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0

S/C-Social Class, P/K- Prior Knowledge, P/A- Personal Attractiveness, G/R-Gender

Table 3 shows that college tutors at college C generally believe that the following factors influence assessment of teaching practice and the distribution of responses is as follows: social class (95%), prior knowledge (95%), gender (80%), personal attractiveness (90%), gifts (90%), and other (0%).

Table 4: Factors influencing teaching practice assessment: national sample (n=51)

Factor	Affects	Does not affect	Affects to a limited extent	Undecided
S/C	43(84.3%)	5 (9.8%)	1(1.9%)	2(3.9%)
P/K	43(84.3%)	2(3.9%)	5(9.8%)	1(1.9%)
G/R	36(70.6%)	5(9.8%)	7(13.7%)	3(5.9%)
P/A	17(33.3%)	11(21.6%)	3(5.9%)	2(3.9%)
Gifts	40(78.4%)	9(17.4%)	2(3.9%)	0
Other	0	0	0	0

S/C-Social Class, P/K- Prior Knowledge, P/A- Personal Attractiveness, G/R-Gender

Table 4 shows that out of a sample of 51 college tutors, 43 (84.3%) report that social class affects assessment of teaching practice while 5 (9.8%) pointed out that it has no influence. Only 1 (1.9%) indicated that social class influences teaching practice assessment to a limited extent. Two (2) out of 51(3.9%) say that they are not decided. Forty three tutors (84.3%) out of 51 indicate that prior knowledge affects assessment of teaching practice, 2(3.9%) say it does not affect, 5(9.8%) report that this factor affects teaching practice assessment to a limited extent while 1(1.9%) is undecided as to whether it affects or not. Regarding the gender of the supervisee or supervisor, 36 out of 51 (70.6%) report that it affects teaching practice assessment. 5(9.8%) say gender does not influence assessment of teaching practice at all while 7(13.7%) indicate that gender of the assessor/assesse influences teaching practice assessment to a limited extent. Three (3) out of 51(5.9%) respondents say that they are undecided as to whether or not gender affects the assessment of teaching practice. Seventeen (33.3%) out of 51 respondents noted that the personal attractiveness of the supervisee affects teaching practice assessment. Eleven tutors (21.6%) observed that personal attractiveness does not affect teaching practice assessment at all. Three tutors (5.9%) report that this factor affects teaching practice assessment to a limited extent while 2(3.9%) are not decided. On whether gifts or promise thereof affects teaching practice assessment, 40 (78.4%) report that this factor does affect teaching practice assessment. By contrast, 9(17.4%) say that conferment or promise of gifts to the assessor does not affect teaching practice assessment at all. Two respondents (3.9%) say that this factor affects teaching practice assessment to limited extent. None of the respondents raised any other factors that affect teaching practice assessment.

Factors influencing assessment:

Table 5. Extent of influence of social class on teaching practice assessment (n=51)

College	Rankings				
	1	2	3	4	5
A	3	2	7	2	0 (n=14)
B	3	2	8	3	1 (n=17)
C	5	4	7	4	0 (n=20)
Total	11(21.6%)	8(15.7%)	22(43.1%)	9(17.6%)	1(2%)

Note: *Rankings are based on an ascending scale from 1 to 5. 5 represents the greatest degree while 1 stands for the lowest degree of influence of the assessee's social class on teaching practice assessment.*

According to **Table 5**, 11(21.6%) out of 51 respondents ranked the extent of influence of social class at 1 on an ascending scale from 1 to 5. Eight respondents (15.7%) ranked social class at 2 on the same while 22(43.1%) ranked the same factor at 3 on the same scale. Nine respondents (17.6%) placed the same factor at 4 of the same scale while only 1(2%) ranked this factor at 5.

Table 6. Extent of influence of prior knowledge on teaching practice assessment (n=51)

College	Rankings				
	1	2	3	4	5
A	0	1	6	4	3 (n=14)
B	2	2	3	6	4 (n=17)
C	3	0	1	11	5(n=20)
Total	5(9.8%)	3(5.9%)	10(19.6%)	21(41.2%)	13(25.9%)

Note: *Rankings are based on an ascending scale from 1 to 5. 5 represents the greatest degree while 1 stands for the lowest degree of influence of prior knowledge about the assessee on teaching practice assessment.*

Table 6 shows that 21(41.2%) ranked prior knowledge at 3 on an ascending scale from 1 to 5 while 13(25.9%) put it at 5 on the same scale. Few respondents ranked the factor on the lower end of the scale, with 5(9.8%) putting it at 1 while 3(5.9%) ranked it at 2. Ten respondents (19.6%) ranked the factor at 3 on the same scale.

Table 7. Extent of influence of gender of the assessor / assessee on teaching practice assessment (n=51)

College	Rankings				
	1	2	3	4	5
A	8	3	2	1	0 (n=14)
B	7	5	1	2	2 (n=17)
C	10	1	6	2	1(n=20)
Total	25(49%)	9(17.6%)	9(17.6%)	5(9.8%)	3(5.9%)

Note: *Rankings are based on an ascending scale from 1 to 5. 5 represents the greatest degree while 1 stands for the lowest degree of influence of the assessee's gender on teaching practice assessment.*

Table 7 shows that most college tutors lowly rank the extent of influence of gender on the assessment of teaching practice. On an ascending scale from 1 to 5, 25(49%) respondents rank the extent of influence of gender at 1 while 9(17.6%) rank it at 2 on the same scale. In the same regard, 9(17.6%) ranked the factor at 3 while 5(9.8%) and 3(5.9%) ranked the same factor at 4 and 5 respectively.

Table 8. Extent of influence of personal attractiveness of the assessee on teaching practice assessment (n=51)

College	Rankings				
	1	2	3	4	5
A	2	1	6	5	0 (n=14)
B	3	1	7	3	3 (n=17)
C	2	3	8	3	4(n=20)
Total	7(13.7%)	5(9.8%)	21(41.2%)	11(21.6%)	(13.7%)

Note: *Rankings are based on an ascending scale from 1 to 5. 5 represents the greatest degree while 1 stands for the lowest degree of influence of the assessee's personal attractiveness on teaching practice assessment.*

Table 8 indicates that most college tutors, 21 (41.2%) ranked the influence of personal attractiveness on an ascending scale from 1 to 5 at 3. On the same scale, 11(21.6%) ranked the influence of this factor at 4. Seven (13.7%) ranked the influence of the same factor at 1 while the same number of respondents ranked this factor at 5. Five (9.8%) ranked the influence of the factor at 2 on the same scale.

Table 9. Extent of influence of gifts on teaching practice assessment (n=51)

College	Rankings				
	1	2	3	4	5
A	0	1	6	6	1 (n=14)
B	3	1	8	3	3 (n=17)
C	3	2	5	6	4(n=20)
Total	6(11.8%)	4(7.8%)	19(37.3%)	15(29.4%)	8(15.7%)

Note: *Rankings are based on an ascending scale from 1 to 5. 5 represents the greatest degree while 1 stands for the lowest degree of influence of gifts offered by the assessee on teaching practice assessment.*

Table 9 shows that most respondents, 19(37.3%) rank the extent of influence of gifts at 3 while 15(29.4%) put it at 4 on the ascending scale from 1 to 5. When asked to suggest more factors influencing teaching practice besides those suggested in the questionnaire, none of the respondents could come up with any.

Discussion and implications of the findings

The above findings suggest that an overwhelming number of college tutors consider the assessment of teaching practice to be biased. This implies that college tutors make use of factors which are not part of the formal criteria of assessment when they conduct teaching practice assessment. This study notes that irrelevant factors that end up being foregrounded during assessment include the social class of the student teacher being assessed, prior knowledge and whether the tutor and student are acquainted with each other. Also important is the nature of the previous interaction on which the acquaintance is based. More factors seen as being the source of bias by the respondents include the gender of the student teacher, that is whether the student is male or female; personal attractiveness of the student, relating to physical features of the student creating a certain impression in the assessor. A further factor seen as influencing the assessment of teaching practice is the promise or the conferment of gifts to the assessor, either in a previous or the immediate context of assessment.

Three major sources of bias salient in this study are gifts, social class and prior knowledge. This implies that bias in teaching practice assessment mainly emanates from the college tutors' interaction with the student teacher outside the immediate context of assessment. It is in that context that the college tutor exchanges gifts with or is promised gifts by students, something which plays a role in shaping the assessor's impression of the student in the context of assessment. It is not surprising to find out that gifts play a significant role given the fact the study was conducted at a time when college tutors, alongside other civil servants bore the brunt of economic down turn in Zimbabwe. These factors do not work in isolation

from each other. Rather they closely interact. The findings of this study also suggest that colleges where tutors are relatively less experienced tend to report greater influence of subjective factors such as those noted above. This ties in with what was established by other scholars that ignorance or lack of clarity about criteria of assessment tends to predispose assessors towards impressionistic assessment. Thus inexperienced college tutors may be still struggling to interpret the criteria of assessment. They will be actually still trying to make up their mind about the defining attributes of a good teacher. This may be particularly difficult for them given the fact that they may lack the much needed induction and support since most of the staff holding senior academic positions are themselves relatively inexperienced.

The failure of college lecturers to adhere to formal criteria of assessment should be an occasion for anxiety since it potentially detracts from the quality and credibility of the teacher preparation programme. Such assessment may no longer be useful in terms of its intended role of enabling the formative monitoring of performance. This means that the college tutors will not be able to supply relevant information about performance to the student; hence the latter will have no basis on which to adjust his performance appropriately. So it is not surprising when scholars such as Zindi (1996) point out that college tutors seem to be preoccupied with awarding a mark as opposed to helping the student improve his or her performance. The college tutors will thus be acting in a manner that is inconsistent with formative assessment. The assessment becomes one of learning rather than for learning. Thus such assessment may not be useful in any way to learning to teach by the student teacher.

Moreover, conducting teaching practice assessment on the basis of factors that are not relevant to objectives of the teacher education course is likely to misdirect or confuse student teachers in terms of what the important components of the course are. The students know what teaching behavior is expected of them and they end up doing anything they think ensures their survival when the college tutor visits them. Such a state of affairs is a cause of anxiety, stress and insecurity on the part of the student teacher, making teaching practice a very stressful experience. No wonder why sometimes student teachers display open fear when their tutors visit their schools for assessment purposes.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study established that teaching practice assessment in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe is biased since college tutors who are primarily responsible for conducting it deviate from formal criteria specified on schedules of assessment. Instead, factors which do not have anything to do with teaching effectiveness are foregrounded, namely; prior knowledge, social class, and promise and /or conferment of rewards on the assessor/tutor. The study also revealed that most of the college tutors are relatively inexperienced; hence they may have difficulty interpreting criteria on the schedules of assessment or may be still unclear about what an ideal teacher is like. An additional exacerbating factor is that there are not enough experienced staff in the colleges to induct new staff into a proper assessment culture. Thus without a supportive framework in relation to interpretation of the assessment criteria, college tutors being stuck as to how to interpret criteria of assessment tend to fall back on a global approach to assessment.

Given what has been noted above, teaching practice assessment as it is currently conducted, does not contribute much to the attainment of the objectives of the teacher education programme. Yet, if properly conducted, teaching practice assessment has the potential of contributing towards improving the quality of the teacher training programme. As things stand, teaching practice assessment is mainly oriented towards assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning. In light of the above this study makes the following recommendations. Firstly, that newly appointed tutors be formally inducted into a proper assessment culture through workshops and seminars. Secondly, where resources permit, the study recommends that team assessment be conducted instead of having one tutor assessing a student teacher. In this regard, colleges should make full use of mentors by involving them in the team assessments. This will enable colleges to cross-verify assessments. Thirdly, it is recommended that further research covering all primary teachers' colleges be conducted in order to establish other factors that contribute to bias in teaching practice assessment with a view to developing appropriate intervention.

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