

ENSURING QUALITY IN PRESERVICE INTERNSHIP TEACHING IN CHINA: STAKEHOLDERS' VOICES IN BEIJING

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore how quality teaching is ensured during preservice teaching internship in China. Data were collected through interviews with four groups of stakeholders: university professors, interns, mentors and school administrators. The study showed that quality teaching during internship is ensured by thoroughly grounding the interns in their subject content areas and education courses which include pedagogy at the training institution and through the support the interns get from their professors, mentors and school administrators during teaching practice. However the study proposes that strong cooperation between the cooperating schools and the teacher training institutions is required to achieve a strong alignment between course work and teaching practicum.

Key words: intern, teaching practice, internship, mentor, practicum

Introduction

Teachers are the backbone of any education system, from kindergarten to university. They are at the center of what is happening in an education system (Ayodele & Oyewole, 2012). To stress the importance of teachers, Henard and Leprince, (2008) argue that the quality of education cannot be higher than the quality of its teachers. Therefore, for quality education to be a reality in any country there is need to have well trained and qualified teachers at all levels of education. Tuli and File (2009) also attest to this fact by noting that teachers of high quality will lead to high quality education. However, for a country to have quality teachers there must be a high quality teacher training program. According to UNESCO (2006), teacher quality covers a number of issues such as knowledge, skills, competencies, motivation and effectiveness to deliver in a classroom which could be acquired through theory and also practice. Based on a study which they conducted in Germany, Voss and Gruber (2006) found that the most important attributes for teachers are expertise, communication skills, teaching skills, humour, friendliness, teaching methods and enthusiasm. While some of the important attributes are arguably inborn, a good number of them are acquired during training. Therefore for a teacher to possess most of the critical attributes that make a teacher to be of high quality, a teacher training program must emphasise both theoretical and practical aspects. A very important element of the practical aspect of teacher training is internship. This paper discusses how quality teaching is ensured during internship in China.

Teacher training in China

According to Chen and Mu (2010), Chinese teacher education system has been around for more than one hundred years. However, over the years it has undergone several transformations as a way of improving the system so that it serves the country better. Currently, teachers in China are trained in teacher training colleges and universities (both normal and comprehensive) up to College degree, Bachelors degree and also Masters Degree. In the past, teacher training was offered in normal schools, normal colleges and normal universities and used to enroll graduates of junior secondary school to be trained as primary school teachers, graduates of senior secondary school to be trained as teachers in junior secondary school and graduates of senior secondary school to be trained as teachers in senior secondary school respectively (Chapman, Cheng & Postiglione, 2000). Although there could be some minor differences on how the training programs are currently organized, generally the programs follow a similar curriculum pattern in that they start with theoretical content before the student teachers go for their teaching practicum which is done in the final year of the programs for a period of about ten weeks (Chen & Mu, 2010). The focus of this paper is on preservice teacher trainees studying for a Bachelors Degree at a teacher training institution.

Internship

Internship is the period of time when teacher trainees are deployed to different schools to do their teaching practice which is an integral part for teacher training. Prior to this time, arrangements are made between teacher training institutions and the schools where the interns are sent. Internship in preservice teacher training is considered as a bridge between theoretical courses learnt at a training institution and the teaching profession. According to Cheng (2013), teaching internship “provides opportunities for preservice teachers to internalize the theories learnt in the campus courses into their own knowledge by practicing the theories in classroom teaching under the guidance and support of their school mentors” (p. 6). During internship, the teacher trainees are given the opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge into practice. This therefore means that the main aim of internship is to enable the intern to convert what was learnt as theory into practice.

Teaching internship plays a very crucial role on the student teachers’ professional development. During internship, a student teacher is in a very complicated situation operating at two levels to adjust to life as a student, under the control of mentors and supervisors and also life as a teacher, managing his/her class (Koerner & Rust, 2002). Loughran, Korthagen and Russel, (2015) also note that teacher trainees struggle with being learners of learning and learners of teaching at the same time and what they experience as learners of teaching can have far reaching consequences on their future career. Therefore an intern’s experience during internship can make or break his/her teaching career depending on how the experience has been to the intern. Tuli and File (2009) also attest to the important role of internship by indicating that “practicum experiences among preservice teachers are often described as the most important part of teacher education program” (p. 110). Additionally, Haciomeroglu (2013) also considers internship as very important by arguing that it is one of the most critical elements of teacher training.

Models of internship. There are different models of teaching practice that different countries or universities adopt during teacher training. Manzar-Abbas and Lu, (2013) shed some light on teaching internship arrangement in some

teacher training institutions in the world. They note that some institutions adopt a block type of internship. In this one, student teachers are firstly taught all theory courses at the training institutions before being deployed in the schools towards the end of their program for a specified period of time such as ten weeks. On the other hand, in some institutions, teaching practice is integrated with the other aspects of the training program throughout the whole period of training. The latter arrangement ensures that in every year of the training program there is an element of teaching practice. Heeralah and Bayaga (2011) look at the arrangement of teaching internship in South Africa. They observe that student teachers are deployed in schools for internship for a period of time towards the end of their training. The period starts with class observations where the interns observe some teachers delivering their lessons. This is followed by the interns themselves teaching the classes under the supervision and mentorship of experienced teachers in the schools. China follows a similar approach as indicated by Manzar-Abbas and Lu, (2013). Figure 1 below is a diagrammatic presentation of a teacher training programme showing the relationship between theory and practicum in teacher training.

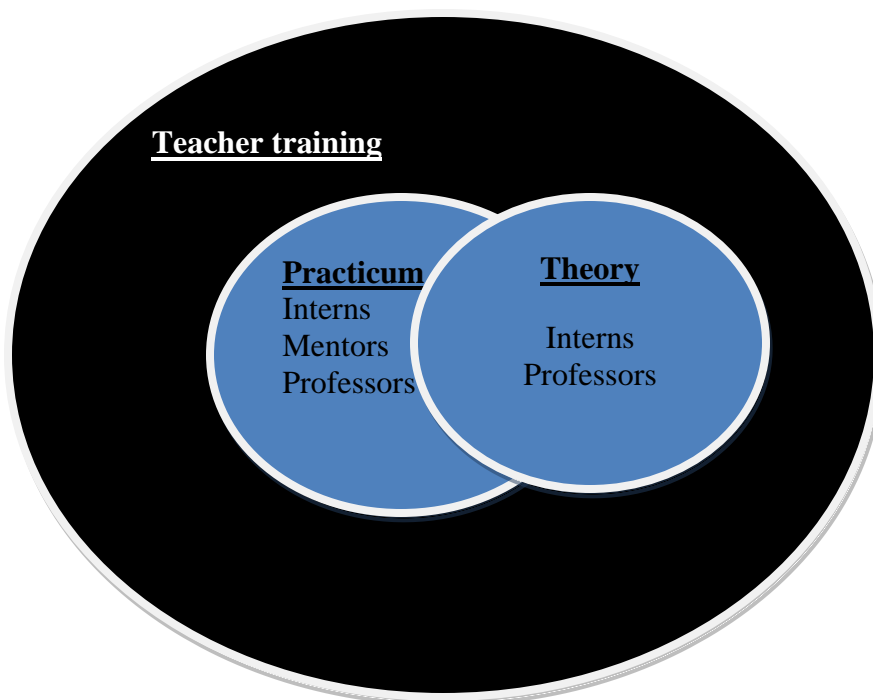


Figure 1: Representation of a teacher training programme

Purpose of the study

There are concerns about the quality of teacher training in general and teaching internship in particular in different parts of the world (Rosemary, Richard & Ngara, 2013; Ayodele & Oyewole, 2012; Tuli & File, 2009). Among other things, the concerns revolve around how the teacher training programmes are organized. In most cases the training programmes are said to be weak because they do not give the students enough time for practice or they do not effectively ground the students in theory content and sometimes there is a misalignment between theory and what is done during practicum (Darling-Hamond, 2006; Loughran, Korthagen & Russel, 2015). All these purported

weaknesses could have a negative effect on the quality of teachers that are being trained. Therefore a study was carried out to explore mechanisms put in place to ensure quality in preservice internship teaching in China.

Specific objectives.

1. To determine how training institutions prepare teacher trainees for their teaching roles during internship
2. To determine the support that interns are given in schools during internship to ensure quality teaching.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework used in the study was based on the 3P Model (Biggs, 1993). The model postulates that in measuring quality, the following variables should be considered: presage, process and product. Presage variables are those that are in the education context or environment before students start learning. They could refer to issues of resources availability, quality of teaching staff, quality of students that are enrolled, infrastructure, and quality of management just to mention some. Process variables are those that deal with what goes on in the classroom such as amount of class time, teaching methods, feedback and class size. Product variables are those that focus on the outcomes of the education process such as student performance, student retention and employability (figure 2). Materu (2010) adopts the same model to look at quality of education by using slightly different terminology. He looks at input, processes and output. In teacher training, presage variables or inputs could cover a number of issues to do with the training institution and the schools where the interns are sent for teaching practice. Process variables could focus on how the student teachers are handled both at institutional and school levels to develop expertise in teaching. Product variables or output look at what the student teachers are able to do during teaching practice. The product or output of a teacher training program will largely depend on both the input and process. Quality teaching in this discussion refers to the meeting of minimum standards of teaching without compromising pupils' learning on the understanding that interns are not expected to provide teaching of very high level because they are still in training. It entails teaching that fits the purpose of the teaching practice institutions and also that is able to register some form of transformation on the learner in terms of knowledge, attitudes and values. Transformation and fitness for purpose are the two most valued definitions of quality in education as they put the learner at the center of the teaching and learning process (Horsburgh, 2000).

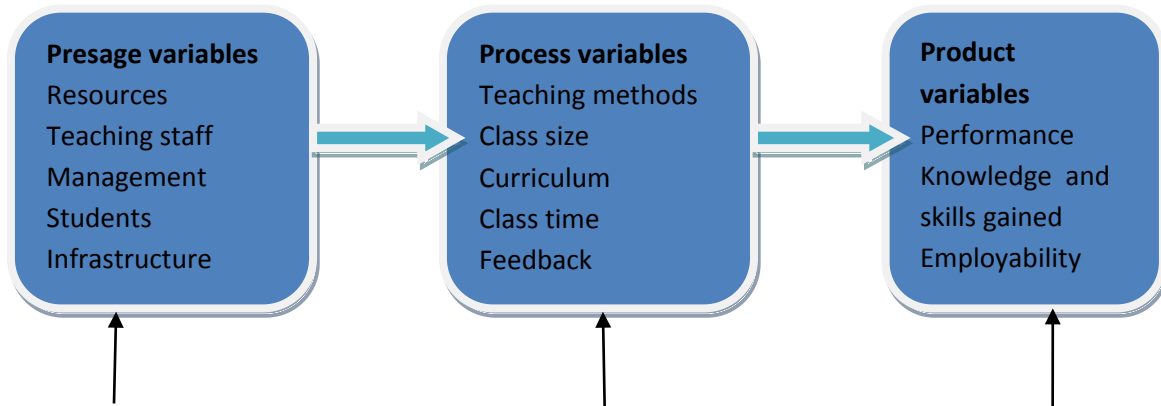


Figure 2: Adaptation of Biggs 3P Model

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach which according to Johnson and Chritensen (2008) is “research relying primarily on the collection of qualitative data (non numerical data such as words and pictures)” (p. 388). This approach was considered appropriate because the researchers wanted to have a deep understanding of teacher internship in China. Haepfl (1997), states that qualitative research designs are used to better understand a phenomenon which is not very well known to the researcher or to gain new perspectives and have more in-depth information on a phenomenon about which much is already known. In the case of the current the research, the researchers have enough knowledge about internship in general but wanted to have a deep understanding of it in the context of China.

Data for the study were collected from four groups of people who are involved in issues of internship around Beijing. These are professors in the teacher training institutions, interns who are sent to different schools for teaching practicum, mentors in schools where the interns are sent to do their teaching practice and administrators in the schools where internship is done. It was envisaged that these people would provide vital information that would give some insights about internship. For example, it was expected that professors would give more information about how the trainee teachers are prepared in the training institutions before they go for teaching practice. The teacher trainees themselves would give in-depth information about how they are prepared in the institution, how they are mentored, supervised and assessed in the schools where they do their teaching practice. The researchers also thought of including mentors in the study because they are the ones who play a vital role in helping the interns develop their profession in the schools. School administrators were also considered important because they are the contact people with training institutions and they also monitor the progress made by the interns during the course of the internship. The collection of data from different groups of people helped to triangulate the findings and thus making the study more credible as argued by Maxwell, (2009)

The sample for this research was identified using convenience sampling. According to UNESCO (2005), convenience sampling is the type of sampling where subjects are selected based on their accessibility to the investigator. Therefore, the subjects in this study were those people who were reachable and accepted to take part in the study. The sample was made up of four interns who had just come back from internship and were back to their training institution. There were also two mentors who are teachers at a middle school. The sample also had two professors at a teacher training institution and two administrators from two middle schools.

The study used semi structured face to face interviews to collect data from the respondents. The use of interviews as a data collection tool has been highlighted by many researchers. For example, Creswell (2003) indicates that interviews are one of the most important means for collecting data in a qualitative study because of the opportunity that a respondent is accorded to freely talk about an issue from their perspective and this helps researchers to have deep understanding about the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally face to face interviews give the researcher an opportunity to make the data richer through the use of the respondent's nonverbal cues during the interviews. These cues help to add more insights which may not be very apparent through the spoken words.

An interview guide was prepared for each of the four groups of respondents as indicated above. The interview guide had both open ended and closed ended questions. Although different groups of people were targeted, the questions solicited basically the same information from different perspectives. Broadly, the questions focused on issues of interns' preparation in the training institutions and their teaching practice experience in the schools. Each interview lasted for 50 to 60 minutes and the interviews were conducted in secure venues to maintain the interviewees' privacy. Interviews with mentors, professors and administrators were conducted in their offices while students were given a choice on where they wanted to be interviewed. Most of them preferred quiet places which also provided the much needed privacy. The researchers took down the notes from the interviews at the same time and compared them during data processing. This also helped to make the data credible.

Data analysis started with the processing of the raw data in form of notes from the interviews. These were properly typed using a word processor to produce transcripts. The researchers then carefully read through all the transcripts several times to familiarise themselves with the data and have a full understanding of the data. Based on the research questions, themes were extracted from the data set and relationships between the themes were also examined. All the information belonging to one theme was put together by pasting parts of the transcripts to their appropriate themes under each research question using Microsoft word.

Findings

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study based on the research questions which focused on how teacher training institutions prepare student teachers for their teaching roles during internship and also how the student teachers are supported in their practicum schools.

Course work at the training institution

The training institution where the teachers are trained plays a vital role on the quality of teaching during teaching practice. A training institution is the first stage in the process of developing a teacher. It equips the teacher trainee with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that shape his/her life in the teaching profession. The study has found out that the professors in the faculties where teachers are trained teach the trainee teachers a number of disciplines to help them get properly trained for their future teaching responsibilities. According to Smith and Lev-Ari, (as cited in Cheng, 2013),

campus based courses play a very important role in the development of the pre service teacher which has a great impact on the quality of their teaching practicum. The programme design should be comprehensive enough to cover different teaching strategies that could develop a concrete theoretical basis on their teaching. The subject matter courses should equip them with substantial subject knowledge to cope with the curriculum of the practicum schools. The pedagogy courses should equip them with substantial pedagogical content knowledge so that they are confident in their teaching practicum (p 7).

Subject content areas. The study found out that teacher trainees are comprehensively taught about the subjects which they will teach in schools in order to fully equip them with adequate knowledge of what they will teach. This is done in the belief that a teacher trainee without adequate knowledge about the subject(s) he/she will teach in school will negatively affect the quality of teaching during internship and beyond. The provision of adequate content knowledge to the teacher trainee is vital for the development of expertise in the subjects that they will teach in schools. Writing about field experiences of student teachers in teacher training programmes in Turkey, Hacımeroglu (2013) also touches on the importance of content courses at the teacher training institution. Further, Voss and Gruber (2006) argue that expertise is one of the most critical attributes of a teacher. Therefore for the trainees to develop into quality teachers, they are required to develop the necessary expertise in their profession. According to the professors in the study, trainee teachers are adequately taught the different aspects of the curriculum so that they acquire adequate knowledge in their teaching subjects at school.

Education courses. Student teachers are also taught education courses such as philosophy of education, history of education, educational psychology, and sociology of education. These provide them with knowledge that is directly related to education and they help them to develop professionally in terms of acquiring the skills that are required for effective teaching. The teacher trainees indicated that before they went to do internship, they had spent more than 40 hours each on pedagogy and psychology. In addition to these subjects, trainee teachers are also taught teaching methodologies for different subjects, lesson planning and delivery, class management and student assessment. All these areas were considered to be very crucial by the respondents in ensuring quality teaching during internship. Voss and Gruber (2006) also report about the importance that is attached to teachers' attributes such as

approachability, communication skills, teaching skills and teaching methods all of which could be a product of education courses which are learnt in teacher training institutions. On the other hand, Haciomeroglu, (2013) argues that pedagogy courses and general education courses help teacher trainees to develop pedagogical knowledge including class management and counseling and they also equip them with background knowledge on social, cultural and historical issues.

While teaching the student teachers all the required theoretical courses in their universities is an important element in the training of a teacher, the way they are taught also matters a great deal. That is why Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that teacher educators should not just be worried about what to teach the student teachers but also how to teach them. She therefore proposes a way of teaching that will make student teachers to become adaptive people who will continue to learn in different other ways. Additionally Darling-Hammond (2006) and Grossman, Hammerness, McDonald and Onfeldt (2008) argue for the teaching of course work that will bring integration and coherence of all course work rather than teaching the courses in isolation and in a disjointed manner. While this could be referred to as inter-subject integration, one would also argue for intra-subject integration where students will be taught in ways that will make them have a wholesome view of a subject rather than looking at it from the point of view of isolated topics.

Mentorship

Mentors or cooperating teachers are experienced teachers that assist teacher trainees in schools during internship. They are a very important resource in ensuring quality teaching of interns. Mentors can be said to be teachers who initiate trainees into the world of professional teaching and into the school society. They provide a link between teacher training institutions and the teaching profession. They are the people who help the interns to put what they learnt in the university into practice in a real life situation. Therefore mentors have to be teachers with high personal integrity, good academic and professional qualifications and adequate teaching experience. The study has found out that most of the people who are given the responsibility of mentoring teacher trainees are those with Masters Degree in Education and with vast teaching experience. Each of the mentors in this study had more than twenty years of teaching experience. This was very good for the trainee teachers' development. Writing about different types of coherence in teacher training programmes, Grossman, Hammerness, McDonald and Onfeldt (2008) note that one way of achieving coherence is through the selection of appropriate cooperating teachers. Although they are not very explicit on the mentor selection issue, one could assume that some of the attributes outlined above could be used in the selection process. At the same time teacher training institutions would be willing to select cooperating teachers with whom they share a common goal and understanding that could help the intern to develop into an accomplished teacher by the end of the training. Haciomeroglu, (2013) notes that cooperating teachers need to be people with integrity and he reports of some cooperating teachers who were not helpful to the student teachers by among other things failing to suggest what student teachers need to improve and providing feedback without observing the interns. At the same time, Glenn (2006) gives a list of what one could call qualities of a good mentor: a good mentor should be more of a collaborator rather than dictator, should show a balance between control and trainee

independence, should allow a personal working relationship to flourish, should share constructive feedback and should accept differences with his or her mentee.

According to one intern, mentors help them on “how to go along with school leaders, colleagues, students and even parents. They also assist on how to get things done flexibly, efficiently and how to develop a positive attitude towards work and students.” Generally, mentors provide support to student teachers which helps them develop the art of teaching in their specialized subject areas and encourage student teachers to develop professionally through a number of strategies such as being a role model, advisor and counselor. Mentors may allow student teachers to observe their lessons so that they are shown the way on how teaching is conducted. Even outside the classroom, mentors endeavor to set a good example of professional behavior for student teachers to follow. Mishandling of interns by mentors during internship would greatly compromise the quality of teaching and would also have far reaching consequences on the interns’ teaching careers. However, the study has found out that there is a good working relationship between the interns and their mentors in the schools where teaching practice is done. Glenn (2006) also reports such good and cordial working relationship between mentors and their mentees in a study which he conducted. However, he notes that such reported good relationships may not reflect the real situation on the ground. He notes that interns may not want to report their mentors’ weaknesses because in some cases they would need them to write letters of recommendations for jobs.

In terms of the student-provided data, we must consider also that student teachers face unique circumstances due to their joint role as student and as teacher. Unlike employed teachers, they are dependent upon their cooperating teachers for letters of recommendation that may influence whether or not a permanent teaching position is attained after the student teaching experience. As a result, student teachers might feel as though they need to avoid a disruption of the power balance and thus choose not to contradict or call into question a teacher’s practices. Their willingness to share honestly might be shaped by their fear of jeopardizing a future job offer (Glenn, 2006, p.94).

Supervision

Another strategy that is put in place to ensure quality teaching in internship is supervision. According to the findings, supervision is done by university professors and mentors in schools. However, the study has found out that most of the supervision work is done by mentors in the schools who meet the trainee teachers between once and five times in a week on average while university professors visit the trainee teachers once or twice in two weeks. Supervision involves observing the interns delivering lessons and giving them feedback after the lesson. Their discussions focus on issues of class management, interaction with students, time management and teaching strategies among other things. The most important aspect about supervision is that at the end of a lesson, the teacher trainee is given time to reflect on the lesson by looking at what worked well and what needs to be improved on in future lessons.

Supervision leads to evaluation or assessment where the teacher trainees are evaluated on a number of aspects in their teaching. According to this study, the interns are evaluated based on lesson preparation, lesson presentation, mastery of subject content, lesson evaluation and teacher personality among others. The interns’ evaluation grade is made up of 50% of the mentor’s grade and another 50% of the supervisor’s grade. In itself, the evaluation process makes the teacher trainee to try to improve on his/her teaching so that at the end of the teaching practice period they

should be awarded a good grade. According to the findings of the study, mentors play dual roles of supervisor and mentor. This is in line with Ambrosetti and Dekkers, (2010) who note that despite differences between mentoring and supervision, mentors in preservice teacher education engage in both mentoring and supervisory roles. Additionally, Loughran, Korthagen and Russel, (2015) advise that there should be a triangle of supervision discussions involving the cooperating teacher, the intern and the university professor to look at the progress of the intern where the intern should also be given a voice

Conclusion

For any teacher training institution to produce teachers of high quality there is need to have a strong and vibrant teacher training program with strong theoretical and practical aspects. According to Darling-Hammond (2006) among other things such powerful teacher training programmes are a requirement in the contemporary times because of the highly diversified student groups whose needs are also diversified. Therefore teacher training programmes should produce teachers who are well prepared to deal with the diversity of the student population and other problems which are rocking the contemporary teaching profession. On the theoretical part, the training institutions should aim at adequately equipping the teacher trainees with all the required knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them in the development of their profession. The practical aspect depends mostly on the organization of internship and what happens during internship. The study has found out that there are some important strategies that are put in place in the Chinese situation to ensure high quality teaching during internship. However, there is need to do more to further improve the situation.

Further reflection

Based on the findings of the study and the literature that was reviewed, the researchers decided to give more insights into some areas by way of reflecting on some of the critical issues in teacher education.

Strong collaboration between schools and teacher training institutions. When student teachers are going for internship, the schools they go to take more responsibility over them than their training institutions because they become part of the school community. In this way therefore, the schools are helping in training the teacher trainees. However, this partnership cannot yield much if there is no close collaboration between the training institutions and the schools. Close collaboration benefits the interns in that they will be able to get the necessary social and professional support from the schools' management. Close collaboration is required "to ensure that the experience is beneficial and meets the needs of ensuring a quality student teaching experience" (Guo & Pungur, 2008, p. 262). Furthermore, the close collaboration will ensure that the teacher trainees are paired with mentors who are well qualified, experienced and who are ready to willfully work with the teacher trainees. Therefore there is need for constant discussions between the training institutions and the schools' administrators at a macro level and between university supervisors and mentors at a micro level to foster a good working relationship (Casey & Howson as cited in Cheng, 2013).

Many writers on teacher education have highlighted the need for close collaboration between cooperating schools and the teacher training institutions. For example, Loughran, Korthagen and Russel, (2015) argue that lack of cooperation between the university professors and the cooperating teachers may lead to misalignment between the theory that is taught in the training institutions and what the student teachers actually do in class. Similar to the argument above, Grossman, Hammerness, McDonald and Onfeldt, (2008) note that lack of cooperation could lead to training programme incoherence. On the other hand, Darling-Hammond, (2006) notes that one attribute of a powerful teacher training programme is strong collaboration between universities and the schools.

Training opportunities for mentors. To enhance the efficiency of mentors in assisting the trainee teachers, teacher training institutions should consider conducting mentorship programs targeting teachers in the cooperating schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The mentorship programmes would be part of the continuing professional development for the cooperating teachers. The purpose of these programs would be to improve the mentors' skills, attitudes and knowledge in assisting the teacher trainees. Some of the issues reported by Haciomeroglu, (2013) could be a result of lack of mentoring knowledge and skills whose genesis could be lack of mentor training. Therefore as Hudson and Hudson, (2010) suggest, "Suitable mentors must be prepared in their roles as pre service teacher educators by having particular knowledge to take deliberate action in their mentoring, and by developing the specific skills to critique constructively both their own teaching practices and their mentees' practices" (p. 4). This in turn will have a positive impact on the quality of teaching by the interns. However, the success of the mentor training programmes would heavily depend on the cooperation that exists between the universities and the schools.

Arrangement of internship. According to the findings of the study, internship is done at the beginning of the fourth year of the four year academic program with a duration of about ten weeks. This clearly shows that the aim is to comprehensively prepare the teacher trainees in theory before they engage themselves in practical teaching. However, this arrangement is criticized by some researchers because it does not give the interns enough time to adequately master teaching skills (Manzar-Abbas and Lu, 2013). Darling-Hammond (2006) outlines some of the common features of what she calls successful teacher training programmes and one of them is an extended period of practicum which she puts at 30 weeks at least. She observes that

traditional versions of teacher education have often had students taking batches of front-loaded course work in isolation from practice and then adding a short dollop of student teaching to the end of the program—often in classrooms that did not model the practices that had previously been described in abstraction (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 8).

On the other hand, Manzar-Abbas and Lu, (2013) propose that teaching practice should not be a one off activity. It should be integrated with teaching of theory throughout the four years in that each year there should be some form of internship before the main internship in year four of teacher training. In this way, the interns will be able to reflect on their experiences and work on aspects in which they have not reached full proficiency.

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