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Experiences of Cooperating Teachers on Teaching Practice Supervision in Eswatini, Swaziland

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Abstract

Cooperating teachers (CTs) are key participants in ensuring a valuable experience for the student teacher (ST) during teaching practice. Surprisingly, their voices largely remain absent in the extant literature. Thus, the purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of CTs during teaching practice supervision in Eswatini. A descriptive research design using a census of 46 CTs for student teachers (STs) who did teaching practice in the 2015/16 academic year of the University of Eswatini in the Department of Agricultural Education was used. A self-administered questionnaire was used for collecting data. A five-point numerical scale and six-point Likert-type rating scale were used to measure the variables. Three lecturers from the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension and two agriculture teachers established content and face validity for the questionnaire. Inter-item reliability from a pilot study was .78. Findings of the study revealed that CTs were supported by the University through the supervisors and Teaching Practice Handbook. The CTs noted that establishing rapport with the STs was essential and head teachers needed to visit the STs in the respective classes they teach. STs were good in developing, organizing and using instructional materials but had challenges in disciplining learners. The study recommended that CTs should be provided with trainings and incentives so that they can effectively discharge their duties during teaching practice.

Keywords: cooperating teachers; in-service teachers; student teachers; teaching practice; teaching practicum

Introduction

A cooperating teacher (CT) is a practicing, in-service teacher, who assumes the responsibility of working with a pre-service teacher for a set length of time (Zeichner, 2002). The CT provides day-to-day guidance and mentoring to the ST (Smalley, Retallick, & Paulsen, 2015). CTs have a strong influence on the teaching practice of STs (Rozelle & Wilson, 2012); as they usher them to the profession (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). The CT is considered as a master teacher, a guidance counsellor, a master planner and organizer, and a sympathetic father or mother to the ST (University of Eswatini [UNESWA], 2018). The role of a CT is to mentor the ST (Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011). Thus, the CT is recognised as one of the key participants in ensuring a valuable experience to the ST during teaching practice (Zeichner, 2002).

Tsikati and Nxumalo (2018) found that the CT works most closely with the ST than any of the stakeholders. Clarke et al. (2014) revealed that CTs serve as: (i) providers of feedback, (ii) gatekeepers of the profession, (iii) modelers of practice, (iv) supporters of reflection, (v) purveyors of context, (vi) conveners of relation, (vii) agents of socialisation, (viii) advocates of the practical, (ix) gleaners of knowledge, (x) abiders of change, and (xi) teachers of children. Torrez and Krebs (2012) reported that CTs organize teaching resources and materials such as access to teaching files, copies of textbooks, and assessments for the ST. Consequently, CTs are the most important contributors to the teacher preparation programme; by the role that they play during the teaching practice experience (Clarke et al., 2014). Additionally, headteachers, on behalf of the school administration should also visit the STs to contribute towards their professional development (Holland, 2009).

Stoyhoff (1999) described the task of CTs as that of organizing the teaching practice experiences by effectively integrating knowledge and the act of teaching. Lewis (2017) identified three main areas in which CTs should be grounded for effective ST supervision. These are knowledge, learning, and sharing. Regarding knowledge, CTs should possess required skills; be resourceful as role models; have wisdom to provide insight where necessary; and know their duties or professional obligations in directing the ST. CTs should also be learning continuously; in order to inspire the STs. They should learn through reflection on their practices; be exemplary for the pre-service teachers and should be passionate about education so that the STs are inspired. Finally, the CTs should be willing to share by interacting with the pre-service teachers, which serves as a network. The CTs can share teaching philosophy, classroom rules, procedures and routine; arrangement of the classroom by discussing ST progress; established relationships; providing ST support; and leaving a legacy on the ST's teaching experience.

Thus, the ST can benefit from the experiences by the cooperating teacher. Kahn (2001) argued that the university community can support CTs by providing improved communication on university expectations, new courses, and in-servicing training. STs were good at developing and organizing instructional materials for their lessons, which made the task simpler for the CTs (Cincioglu, 2011). CTs also found STs to be good at developing teaching and learning materials (Allen & Eby, 2009).

However, Cincioglu (2011) reported that CTs were unhappy with the professional and financial support obtained from the universities. Sinclair, Dowson, and Thifleton-Martin (2006) reported that CTs perceived themselves as ineligible to take STs because of their workload and pressure.

The CTs also thought that the STs were not prepared enough for the practicum. According to Kagan (1992) and Stuart and Thurlow (2000) CTs reported that STs had challenges in handling problems related to class discipline, assessing students' work and dealing with individual preferences. Affirmatively, Hastings (2006) stated that a large body of research shows that teacher education programmes fail to adequately prepare STs for facing real class situations.

Harlin, Edwards, and Briers (2002) argued that CTs perceived the relationship between the ST and the CT as one of the major factors for a successful teaching practice. McBride (1996) found that the CTs perceived the success of the teaching practice as a result of the hard work between the CT and the ST. Garton and Cano (1994) contended that CTs should demonstrate the desired teaching behaviors expected of STs. The ST also works in collaboration with a supervisor and a CT throughout the teaching practice (Garton & Cano, 1994). Shinn et al. (2008), when studying the Armenian Agrarian students' perceptions and educational aspirations during curriculum reforms, recommended engagement and dialogue with students. Similarly, engagement and dialogue are essential between the cooperating teacher, university supervisor (US) and the ST.

Cincioğlu (2011) reported that CTs complained that the teaching practicum duration (one semester) was inadequate for the STs. This is because the CTs should get to know their STs for easy working. It appears that just when the CTs start getting to know their STs; it is the time when the STs have to leave the school. Also, the STs are expected to know their students by names; but by the time the names become familiar to the ST, it is time to stop the teaching practice, and this ends up not helping the ST in any way during the practice.

There is a need for disciplined, periodical and detailed training for the CTs to orient them on precautions to be taken during the teaching practice period (Kahn, 2001). In addition, Hastings (2006) believed that the training for the CTs should assist them in overcoming challenges during the teaching practice. Mutlu (2014) advocated that the teaching practicum should be turned into an attractive exercise that CTs would like to be involved in. For instance, providing some time off in which CTs can specifically focus on STs' needs can also enhance the role of CTs (Mutlu, 2014). Mutlu further suggested that CTs should be evaluated at the end of every practice.

The University of Eswatini ensures that STs are attached to CTs at the various cooperating schools. The CTs provide guidance on daily basis while university supervisors visit the STs occasionally (UNESWA, 2018). Some of the CTs' roles in Eswatini as stated in the Teaching Practice Handbook in Agricultural Education, include the following: involving the ST as part of the staff; providing the ST with access to instructional materials; providing an area of work and personal belongings; demonstrating effective teaching techniques; encouraging the ST to observe and ask questions; providing frequent encouragement; making constructive criticisms; and recognition of success, to name a few (UNESWA, 2018).

Considering the contribution of the CT on the successful training of a teacher in the education programme, it is surprising that "the voices of the cooperating teacher...largely remain absent in the extant literature" (Torrez & Krebs, 2012, p. 486). Sleeter (2001) asserted that the most legitimate knowers are the ones who participate in an experience; thus, it is important that CTs are given the opportunity to share their experiences on aspects of student teaching in Eswatini. Unfortunately,

no study has been conducted on the experiences of CTs on teaching practice supervision in Eswatini.

Theoretical Framework

The study was framed by the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory, developed in 1970 (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The theory postulates that any individual exists in a system or environment that has subsystems. Thus, the theory focuses on the interaction of the individual with the environment at the following levels or subsystems: Individual, Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Macrosystem (see Figure 1).

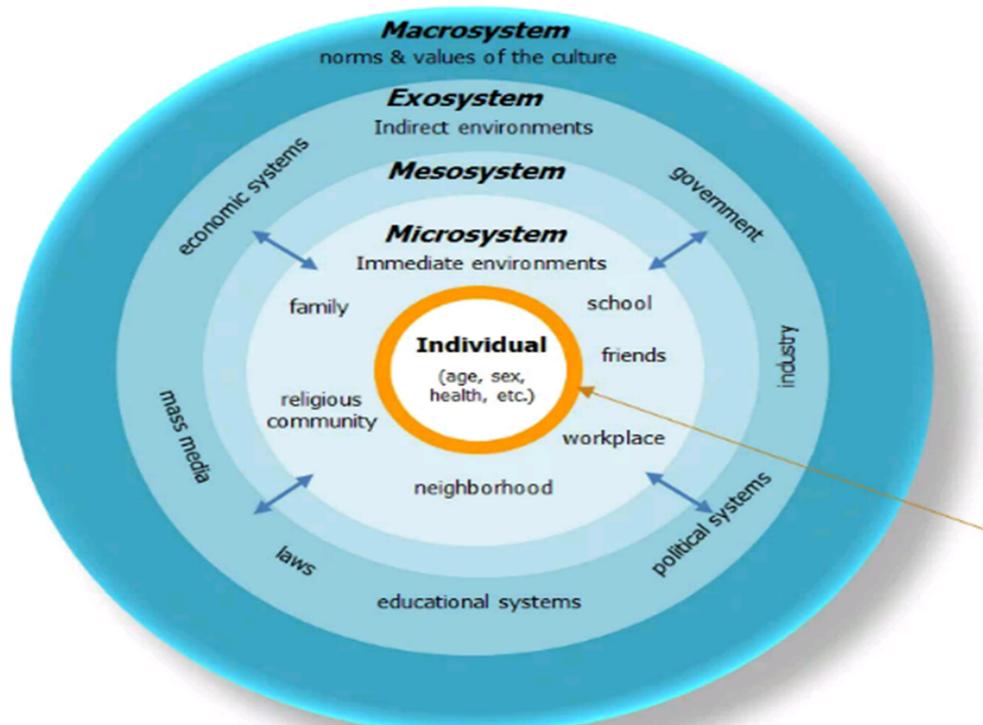


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory.

The core of the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory is occupied by the person [individual] aspect of the system or the environment. Bronfenbrenner (1995) divided the personal characteristics into three types, namely: *demand*, *resource*, and *force* characteristics. The demand characteristic encapsulates the demographic variables of the individual; such as gender, age, health, and physical appearance. The demand characteristic is relevant to this study in that both gender and age are pertinent variables that may influence the experiences of CTs during teaching practice

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The resource characteristics entail mental and emotional resources; such as past experiences, skills and intelligence, as well as access to social and emotional resources. Resource availability can also influence the experiences of CTs during teaching practice (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, the force characteristics have to do with differences of temperament, motivation and persistence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, the temperament, motivation, and persistence also influence the experiences of CTs during teaching practice.

The Microsystem relates to the immediate environment to the individual; such as the family, school, work place, neighborhood, religious community, friends, and so on (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). On the other hand, Mesosystem encompasses the different interactions between the characters of the Microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Exosystem refers to the indirect environment which may moderate the behavior or functioning of the individual such as economic system, educational system, government / political system, industry and media (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, the Macrosystem entails the abstract environment consisting of attitudes / ideologies of the culture in which the individual lives. In this subsystem, societal and cultural practices or norms have an impact on the individual by setting expectations for his or her behavior (Krause, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner revised the theory; and added the Chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) referred to the Chronosystem as the aspect of time. Chronosystem can be viewed in terms of micro-time (what is occurring during the course of some specific activities or interactions), meso-time (the extent to which activities and interactions occur with some consistency in the developing person's environment), and macro-time (the fact that developmental processes are likely to vary according to the specific historical events that are occurring as the developing individuals are at one stage or another) (Frazer, 2014).

All the sub-systems of the theory are relevant in this study. The Microsystem is relevant to the study as CTs are controlled by the expectations from school administration (workplace). In the Mesosystem, the university through the supervisor facilitates interaction between the CTs, STs, and administration. The

Exosystem involves expectations from the Ministry of Education and Training on the student teaching. The Macrosystem relates to attitude and culture about student teaching. Lastly, the Chronosystem - the period of teaching practice is also likely to influence the experiences of CTs on teaching practice.

Study Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of CTs on teaching practice supervision in Eswatini. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Describe the respondents by their demographic characteristics and background information;
2. Describe the current University of Eswatini support system to the teaching practice;
3. Identify challenges that the CTs encountered during supervision;
4. Discover lessons that CTs learnt from the teaching practice supervision;
5. Identify ways in which the role played by CTs on teaching practice can be enhanced.

Methodology

The study was a descriptive survey targeting a census of CTs (N=46) who supervised Agricultural Education STs during teaching practice in the 2015/16 academic year from the University of Eswatini. A self-administered, close-ended questionnaire was developed from literature, and used for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into five sections, namely: teaching practice support system [14 items]; teaching practice challenges [15 items]; teaching practice lessons [5 items]; suggestions on teaching practice [4 items], and demographic characteristics and background information [8 items – sex, marital status, highest level of education,

position, teaching practice exposure, class size, school location and school type]. A numerical scale, using the following ranges: 1=low; 2=moderately low; 3=moderate; 4=high; and 5=very high, was used to measure the support provided by the university during teaching practice. A six-point Likert-type scale, having the following ranges: 1=strongly disagree; 2=slightly disagree; 3=disagree; 4=agree; 5=slightly agree; and 6=strongly agree, was used to measure the challenges, lessons, and ways in which CTs could be assisted during teaching practice. The questionnaire was validated by three experts from the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension at the University of Eswatini and two agriculture teachers. The experts removed irrelevant statements and added missing statements in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was field-tested with three agriculture teachers who had served as CTs in previous years. The inter-item reliability established using Cronbach's Alpha revealed that the questionnaire was 78% reliable.

The researchers collected data from November 2016 until late January 2017. The questionnaires were delivered personally by the researchers to the CTs, and were collected a fortnight later. In addition, cell numbers of the CTs were requested so that the researchers could remind the respondents about the questionnaires prior to

collection. Letters seeking permission to conduct the study were written to the school principals and the respondents; and permission was granted. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaire was formulated such that respondents' names were concealed. The hand delivering of the questionnaires and cell phone numbers did not affect confidentiality, as nothing linked the questionnaires with the respondents. The questionnaires were only accessible to the researchers. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20, were used for analyzing the data.

Findings

Background Information & Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents the background information and demographic characteristics of the CTs for agricultural education STs during the 2015/16 academic year in Eswatini. The findings of the study revealed that most of the CTs were males (n=27, 58.7%). Most of the respondents were from semi-urban areas (n=22, 47.8%). A majority of the CTs (n=31, 67.4%) held a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Education and were mainly classroom teachers (n=24, 52.2%).

Table 1
Distribution of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=46)

Demographics	f	%
Sex		
Male	27	58.7
Female	19	41.3
School location		
Rural	11	23.9
Semi-Urban	22	47.8
Urban	13	28.3
Qualification		
Diploma	1	2.2

B. Sc.	31	67.4
M. Sc.	14	30.4
Position		
Head of department	22	47.8
Classroom teacher	24	52.2

University of Eswatini Support System during Teaching Practice

Table 2 reveals that the university supports CTs and STs through: availing the handbook during teaching practice (M=4.98, SD=0.15), university supervisor discussing ST's performance together with CT (M=4.87,SD=0.34), university supervisor providing ST with written evaluation of observed lessons (M=4.83,SD=0.38),

university supervisor developing clear and strong lines between ST and him/herself (M=4.80, SD=0.40), university supervisor observing ST teaching during his/her visits (M=4.67,SD=0.47); university supervisor gives constructive feedback to ST in the assessment sheet (M=4.67,SD=0.47) ; and providing detailed contents of the handbook (M= 4.26, SD=0.44).

Table 2

University Support System during Teaching Practice

Support system	M	SD
Handbook is made available to CTs during teaching practice	4.98	0.15
University supervisor discusses ST's performance together with CT	4.87	0.38
University supervisor provides ST with written evaluations of observed lessons	4.83	0.38
University supervisor develops clear and strong lines of communication between him/herself and the ST	4.80	0.40
University supervisor observes ST teaching during his/her visits.	4.67	0.47
University supervisor gives constructive feedback to ST in the assessment sheet	4.67	0.47
University supervisor makes adequate visits to the ST	4.65	0.48
The format for lesson plan is in line with those used in the school	4.52	0.51
The roles for the CT are clearly stated	4.50	0.51
Handbook provides adequate information on how to guide ST	4.26	0.44
University supervisor sits with ST for a pre-evaluation conference	3.83	0.42
University supervisor develops clear and strong lines of communication between him/herself and the cooperating teacher	2.78	0.42
The format for scheme book in the handbook is in line with that used in the school	2.52	0.51
University supervisor frequently contacts the school principal about the progress of the ST	1.83	0.38

Rating scale: 1=Low, 2=Moderately Low, 3=Moderate, 4=Medium, and 5=High

These findings are inconsistent with Cincioglu (2011)'s assertion who reported that universities were not supportive both professionally and financially. Engagement

and dialogue between the cooperating teacher, university supervisor, and the ST are essential, as suggested by Shinn et al. (2008), in a study on perceptions and

educational aspirations of Armenian Agrarian students during curriculum reforms. The findings are related to the Mesosystem of the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory, as the university provided support through the supervisors and the Teaching Practice Handbook.

Challenges Faced by CTs during Teaching Practice

Table 3 shows that the challenges faced by CTs during teaching practice

include: head teachers never making visits to observe ST teach ($M=4.98$, $SD=0.15$) and STs having difficulties in instilling discipline to students ($M=4.46$, $SD=0.50$). Similar findings that STs were challenged with class discipline were reported by Kagan (1992) and Stuart and Thurlow (2000). The challenges faced by the CTs are related to the Mesosystem of the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory.

Table 3

Challenges Faced by CTs

Challenges	M	SD
Head teacher never makes visits to observe ST teach.	4.98	0.15
STs have difficulty instilling discipline to students	4.46	0.50
Agriculture teachers are given an order to supervise STs	3.43	0.50
Heavy workload to accommodate ST supervision	2.46	0.50
ST engaged in love affairs with regular staff	2.20	0.62
The ST asks every piece of information from me	2.13	0.69
ST hardly brings own methods for conducting lessons	2.13	0.69
Cannot cope with assisting ST while teaching other classes	1.85	0.36
STs not well prepared for the practicum	1.43	0.50
Classes are not suitable for a ST	1.43	0.50
STs have difficulty assessing students' work	1.41	0.50
ST absents him/herself from school without prior notice	1.37	0.61
ST engages in love affairs with students	1.17	0.38
STs do not take suggestions from the cooperating teacher	1.07	0.25
STs having weak rapport with the cooperating teacher.	1.04	0.20

Rating scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Slightly Disagree, 4=Slightly Agree, 5= Agree, and 6=Strongly Agree

Lessons CTs Learned from the Teaching Practice

The following were lessons learned by CTs during teaching practice: importance of rapport between the CT and ST ($M=5.91$, $SD=0.29$), and STs are very good at developing and organizing instructional materials ($M=5.83$, $SD=0.383$) (see Table

4). The CTs also learned that the eight weeks period of teaching practice was not enough ($M=5.09$, $SD=0.41$). The findings that STs were good in developing and organizing instructional materials for their lessons are confirming those by Allen and Eby (2009) and Cincioglu (2011).

Table 4
Lessons that CTs Learnt from the Teaching Practice

Lessons	M	SD
Rapport between the CT and ST is important during teaching practice	5.91	0.29
STs are good at developing and organizing teaching materials (aids)	5.83	0.38
The eight weeks is not enough for effectiveness to the ST	5.09	0.41
The success of teaching practice is a result of the CT's hard work.	3.15	0.42

Rating scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4=Slightly Agree, 5 =Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree

Also, Cincioğlu (2011) reported that CTs lamented that the teaching practice duration was short, which is consistent with the findings of this study. Findings on the importance of rapport between the CT and ST are in line with the Microsystem of the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory, which emphasizes the importance of interaction between the individual and people in the immediate environment, e.g. the work place. The finding on the duration of teaching practice being short relates well with the Chronosystem of the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory, as it basically focused on the aspect of time.

Suggestions on Enhancing the Role of CTs

Table 5 indicates that the roles of CTs can be enhanced through: providing incentives (M=5.76, SD=0.43) and evaluation on the CTs (M=4.83, SD=0.53). Similarly, Hastings (2006) and Kahn (2001) concluded that the role of a CT during teaching practice can be improved by providing disciplined, periodical and detailed training. Mutlu (2014) recommended that the teaching practicum should be turned into an attractive work experience, and the CTs should be evaluated at the end of every practice. The suggestions on how the role of CTs could be enhanced have policy implications. These findings touch on the Exosystem, and Macrosystem of the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory.

Table 5
Suggestions on Enhancing the Role of CTs

Suggestions	M	SD
Providing incentives	5.76	0.43
Evaluation of CTs	4.83	0.53
Relieved CT from other duties to focus on STs	2.59	0.69
Provide detailed training on the roles of a CT	1.59	0.59

Rating scale: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree,3= Slightly Disagree, 4= Slightly Agree, 5= Agree and 6= Strongly Agree

Conclusions & Implications

The University of Eswatini- Department of Agricultural Education and Extension supports the CTs through the University supervisors, who communicate or visit them, and the provision of a teaching

practice handbook. Head teachers at the teaching practice schools were not making visits to observe the STs. STs also had problems with disciplining students. The Department of Agricultural Education and Extension is providing adequate training to

the STs on the development and usage of instructional materials.

The provision of a teaching practice handbook reaffirms the individual level–resource characteristics of the Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Also, the suggestion by the CTs that they should be provided with detailed training in form of motivation (force characteristics - individual level of Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Theory) as they will acquire skills necessary to supervise the teaching practice (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The findings of the study confirmed all the subsystems of the Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Theory: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. The Microsystem was confirmed as it stresses the importance of interaction between the individual and people in the immediate environment e.g. the work place (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which encompasses the findings on the importance of rapport between the CT and ST. The Mesosystem was re-affirmed, as it entails the different interactions between the characters of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) reiterated in this study by the findings that the university provided support through the supervisors and the Teaching Practice Handbook. The Exosystem and Macrosystem were confirmed through the suggestions made by the CTs as they have policy implications. The Exosystem relates to the indirect environment moderating the behavior or functioning of the individual, while the Macrosystem entails the abstract environment, consisting of attitudes / ideologies in which the individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, the Chronosystem was confirmed by the finding that the duration of teaching practice was short, as it basically focused on the aspect of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The

findings of the study imply that CTs internationally, should have rapport with the STs and the university should collaborate with the cooperating school for the success of the teaching practicum.

Recommendations

The Department of Agricultural Education and Extension should improve the role played by the CTs by providing workshops, seminars, and conferences. A course on ST supervision must be introduced to equip prospective CTs with requisite mentorship skills. CTs should be provided with incentives (such as allowance) to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching practice exercise. In order to produce quality agriculture teachers globally, student teaching supervisors and teaching training institutions should collaborate with the CTs. This could be done by providing detailed relevant feedback to the student’s performance on their progress throughout the teaching practice exercise. Also, a sound relationship between the CT and the ST must be established and maintained, otherwise, the teaching practice may be jeopardized. Further research must be conducted on experiences of teachers, STs, school administration, and learners regarding the teaching practice in the Kingdom of Eswatini. Similar studies must be conducted globally.

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