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Students' perceptions about the relevance of the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme of the University for Development Studies.

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Abstract

The general objective of the study is to find out students' perception towards the Field Practical Programme (FPP) and assess the relevance of the programme in the context of students' area of study. The non-probability sampling technique (purposive) was used to select participants since these students constituted the core information rich group in the study. Questionnaires were the main instrument used in the study because of the literate nature of the participants. The data collected were analysed using frequencies and percentages. However, the open ended responses were grouped according to themes. The study found that participants perceived the FPP as an experience that every student needs to go through. Since the experience acquired through the FPP in the community was different from their earlier thinking about the communities. It was also realised that orientation was given to participants prior to the FPP and this helped them to make necessary adjustments. The experiences participants gained during the FPP were relevant and participants indicated the manner by which the gained experiences were relevant to their programmes of study. It was recommended that university authorities should make the FPP an interesting experience that students will be willing to undertake since many students found it difficult staying outside the comfort of their homes. Selection of the communities should be voluntary. It is also recommended that assessment procedures

in the FPP should include oral presentation and sampling views of the community members since this will make students' contributions to the community feasible and authentic.

Keywords: field practical programme (FPP), field experience programme (FEP), third trimester field practical programme (TTFPP)

INTRODUCTION

Field experience is an essential component of student's training in many institutions around the world. The Field Education program plays a pivotal role in student education. Field experience enables students to utilize classroom theory and knowledge, test out skills toward developing professional competence and identity, and begin their commitment to serve clients, communities, neighbourhoods and organizations (Field Education Manual, 2012). Field experiences include skill building, upholding standards of ethics and practice excellence, and developing competent practice. The overall objective of field education is to produce a professionally reflective, self-evaluating, knowledgeable and developing social worker (Field Education Manual, 2012). Field education is viewed as a unique partnership between the school and its agencies with the purpose of designing, implementing, and monitoring a sound educational program for students. Through ongoing communication, the agency and school personnel work towards the development of a shared educational philosophy and standards regarding field assignments, field education, and student performance. This partnership is dynamic in its orientation, responsive to changes in agency environments, in school curriculum, and in the students it seeks to educate (Field Education Manual, 2012).

Most institutions integrate more field experiences into their programs and increase the number and variety of sites in which students are placed (Black & Ammon, 1991; Garibaldi, 1992). It is often noted that placing trainees on field experiences is a critical stage in the training process (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx 1996). Field experience is one of the most common "real world" learning experiences implemented in schools of education (McGlinn, 2003). It is also an integral component of the curriculum of pre-service teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1996; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). Though highly regarded in the education of teachers, field experience has a controversial history, with respect to its impact on teacher learning (Zeichner, 1992). In the 1970s, research on field experience exposed a disconnection between teacher preparation and the practice of teaching. Studies reported negative outcomes of field experience, including changes in student teachers' attitudes (Mahan & Lacefield, 1978) and the development of bureaucratic orientations after student

teaching (Hoy, 1977). By the end of the 1970s, these outcomes of socialization into teaching during early field experience gave impetus to a major effort to restructure field experiences in teacher education. Additionally, the extension of time in the field (Denmark & Nutter, 1979); the modification of supervision (Griffin, 1983); and, the establishment of partnerships and professional development schools, linking university teacher training programs and public schools, represented efforts to improve field experiences in pre-service teacher preparation (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

Prior to students' exposure to field experience, potential field placements may be identified in a number of ways. Agencies may request for students, or a student, faculty member, alumnus, or community representative may suggest them. After verifying the presence of appropriate assignments and the availability of a qualified field instructor, the coordinator of field experience will send a letter acknowledging interest (Field Education Manual, 2012). The Field experience is a collaborative process between institutions and the community. This involves keying out and harnessing resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools. Schools and families must draw regularly upon community resources to support their efforts to educate children. In fact, community representatives and resources may be tapped for other types of involvement such as: communicating with families, volunteering, supporting learning, and participating in school committees. Student learning outcomes are greater when, institutions and community organizations and leaders work together. Children are provided with more opportunities for learning and for linking school knowledge with real world opportunities. They associate with individuals, other than their parents and teachers, who reinforce the importance of learning.

Professional practice involves the dynamic and interactive processes of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation at multiple levels. In recognition of this fact, University for Development Studies, Ghana is pioneering Field experience programme during the Third Trimester of each academic year. This programme dubbed -Third Trimester Field Practice Programme (TTFPP) is an integral part of the University's curriculum for all students in the first two years of their studies in the university. At the end of every Second Trimester, potential candidates for this FPP are oriented for the Field experience. This orientation is compulsory for all students. The rationale is to equip students with relevant skills needed for the programme. However, in spite of this orientation many students seem to be overwhelmed with fear and anxiety about this Field experience programme. This situation propelled the researchers to investigate student's perception on the relevance of this Field experience in their programmes of study at the university. Since the inception of the university in 1992, seemingly little or no research has been conducted on the perceptions of students towards the programme. Research findings on field experience reveal that a careful selection of field trip sites is essential to maximise learning.

The general objective of the study is to find out students' perception towards the FPP and assess the relevance of the programme in the context of students' area of study. The

The specific objectives are:

1. Ascertain students' perceptions towards the FPP
2. Examine the orientation given to students before the FPP
3. Investigate the relevance of the FPP experience to students' area of study

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What perception do students' have towards the FPP?
2. What orientation is given to students before the FPP?
3. How is the FPP experience relevant to students' study area?

The findings of this study might have immense contribution to many individuals, cooperate bodies, and stakeholders in education. The outcome of this study might inform the University authorities on perceptions students have towards the FPP for the refinement of the programme in order to make it a worthwhile one. The university by this study might gain insight into challenges students encounter during the FPP. This will enable to take appropriate steps to mitigate some of these challenges.

The study could also serve as reference material for individuals and for future researchers who might want to extend the frontiers of the study or replicate it in other districts. Cooperate-bodies such as the non-governmental organisations that have vested interest in education may also find this research useful so that they can organise workshops on strategies and measures to curb these challenges.

The FPP is an integrated field experience for all students in the Universality for Development Studies. The program is an integral part of students training in the institution which aims at exposing students to community study. This study focuses on few variables in the context of the FPP. The study is restricted to the perception of students in the Faculty of Education towards the programme as well as the kind of orientation given to students prior to the programme. The study also focused on the relevance of the orientation on students output on the field as well as to the students' area of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of the study is derived from theories of informal education. Since the focus of this study is on the FPP which is informal by nature because of where it is taking place outside the confines of the classroom and in the context of formal education. The study also made use of activity theory which puts one on a sound footing to identify different activities in the learning process (Engestrom, 1999). Informal education is a general term referring to education outside a traditional classroom setting, such as in community-based organizations, libraries, at home, or in museums (Farrant 2004, McGivney, 1999).

According to Farrant (2004), in informal education, learning takes place outside school setting and arises from the activities and interests of individuals and/or groups. Informal learning can be planned learning, such as a presentation or workshop organized in response to identified interests and needs, delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings.

Farrant (2004) makes distinction between "Education" and "Schooling." "Education," he suggests, describes the total process of human learning by which knowledge is imparted, faculties trained, and skills developed, schooling is one of the forms of the conduits through which education is provided, whereas "education" is intentional and requires commitment. Informal education merges these two ideas. Four areas in which people are engaged in informal education and should focus their attention are described: (1) exploring tacit knowledge through reflection, (2) supporting self-education by approaching people as both learners and educators, (3) strengthening associational life by building stronger groups and relationships, and (4) developing informal education alongside formal education relationship.

Another theoretical approach adopted for this study is the theories of overlapping spheres of influence by Epstein (1987). This theory looks at the interrelationship between the school, family, and the community. The theory emphasizes the importance of schools, families, and communities in producing educational outcome. One of the main maxims of the theory is that certain agents of which students' academic achievement is part, have mutual interest of each other and are best attained via their concerted partnership. This perspective represented by family, and community and their connection is determined by the attitudes and practices of the people who are located within each environment (Epstein, 1992). The theory suggests that there is the need to strengthen the link between home, community and school since students succeed when both the internal and external influence intersect and work together in promoting students' learning and development. Fostering a strong connection between the school, home and the community has a positive impact on the academic outcomes of students. "Families, schools and communities are most effective if they have overlapping or shared goals, missions, and responsibilities for children" (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996, p. 270). When the school, family and community have similar goals and aspirations for their children, there is intersection between the various domains, and students' outcomes. This intersection can occur at institutional level or at individual level (Epstein et al, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

A total of 118 participants were drawn from three different departments in the Faculty of Education of the University for Development Studies, Tamale Campus. The non-probability sampling technique (purposive) was used to select participants since they constitute the core

information rich group in the study. Purposive sampling ensures that participants are selected for a particular purpose as it implies in this study (Leady & Ormrod, 2005).

Questionnaires were the main instrument used in the study because of the literate nature of the participants. Section 'A' elicited response on the biographic data of the participants, while Section 'B' and 'C' focused on participants' perception of the FPP. Section 'D' deliberated on the relevance of the FPP experience to participants of the study.

In designing the questionnaire content validity and reliability were established by first examining if the items related to the research questions, if the items comprehensively covered the research questions, whether such items could significantly provide answers to the research questions and if any of the items was ambiguous. This was necessary because when one modifies an instrument or combines instruments in a study, the original validity and reliability may not hold for the new instrument (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996).

The data for the study was gathered by the researcher within a period of one and half months. The researcher personally administered the instruments. Table 1 presents information on participants' programmes of study by gender.

Table 1: Participants' Programmes of Study by Gender

Programme of Study	Male		Female		Total	%
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
B.A Development Education	32	27.4	16	13.7	48	41.0
B. Ed Basic Education	10	8.5	16	13.7	26	22.2
B. Ed Early Childhood Education	22	18.8	21	17.9	43	36.8

Source: Field survey, (2014).

It can be seen from Table 1 that male's representation in the study 54.7% is more than that of the females. Further analysis of Table 1 reveals that the participants in the study were drawn from two departments in the Faculty of Education, Tamale Campus. Participants in the Department of Development Education constituted 41.0%, while the rest constituting 59.0% were drawn from the Department of Basic Education Studies made up of both B. Ed Basic Education and B. Ed Early Childhood Education

Research Question 1: What perception do Students' have towards the FPP?

This research question sought to find out the perceptions students have towards the FPP since it is an integral part of their programmes of study. Data from the likert scale of the questionnaires as well as frequencies and percentages were used in answering this question. Table 2 presents information on the participants' perceptions towards the FPP.

Table 2: Students Perceptions towards the FPP

	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	N (%)
It is an experience that every student needs to go through	74(63.2)	34(29.1)	2(1.7)	4(3.4)	3(2.6)
The communities I visited reminded me of where I came from	34(29.8)	26(22.8)	20(17.5)	18(15.8)	16(14.0)
My experience in the community was different from my earlier thinking about the community	61(62.6)	43(37.1)	2(1.7)	5(4.3)	5(4.3)
Members of the community have positive attitude towards me	68(58.6)	33(28.4)	1(0.9)	6(5.2)	8(6.9)
They supported me with food, water and accommodation	58(49.6)	30(25.6)	7(6.0)	11(9.4)	11(9.4)
They supported me with all the necessary information I needed	52(46.0)	44(38.9)	5(4.4)	3(2.7)	9(8.0)
They provided me with feedback on the services I provided	37(31.9)	54(46.6)	8(6.9)	3(2.6)	14(12.1)
I had a healthy relationship with community	75(64.1)	25(21.4)	6(5.1)	6(5.1)	5(4.3)

Source: Field survey, (2014).

Table 2 reveals that participants indicated varied perceptions towards the FPP. A higher number of them 108 (92.3%) indicated their agreement with the notion that the FPP is an experience that every student needs to go through. They also indicated agreement 104 (99.7%) with the fact that the experience acquired through the FPP in the community was different from their earlier thinking about the community. The participant 101(87%) indicated their acceptance of the fact that the communities visited, reminded them of their origin. They also confirmed 88 (75.2%) the support they enjoyed in the community in terms of food, water and accommodation during the FPP. Other support participants 96 (84.9%) claim they enjoyed in the community through the FPP were support in terms of necessary information needed for the programme. Participants 91(78.5%), acknowledged being provided with feedback on their services to the community during the FPP and also had 80 (68.4%) a healthy relationship with community during the FPP.

Research Question 2: What orientation is given to students before the FPP?

This research question sought to find out whether students were given orientation before the FPP or not. Data from section B of the questionnaires was used answering this question and the main statistical instruments used were frequencies and percentages. The information on whether or not participants were given orientation before the FPP is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Participation and Orientation on FPP

Participation and Orientation on FPP	Yes		No		Total
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
Have you participated in the just ended FPP	115	98.3	2	1.7	117
Were you given preparation about the programme	111	97.4	3	2.6	114

Source: Field survey, (2014).

Table 3 suggests that the large number of the participants in the study representing 115 (98.3%) admitted having participated in the 2013/2014 academic year FPP in the Offinso North and South Districts of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. in the same vein , a large number of the participants 111(97.4%) admitted receiving a kind of orientation towards the programme.

This suggests that students were given orientation before embarking on the FPP

Table 4: Mode of informing students about the FPP Orientation

Mod of Informing students	Frequency	Percentage
Notice Board	2	1.8
Orientation	109	96.5
Colleagues	2	1.8
Total	113	100.0

Source: Field survey, (2014).

Table 4 reveals that many 109 (96.5%) of the participants got to know about the FPP during the orientation.

The analyses of the open ended responses suggest that during the FPP, students were assigned different duties to perform within their respective districts. The duties students performed were grouped according to themes. The major ones include identification of relevant problems for solution within the community, gathering information on the identified problem, daily works, performing leadership role, educating the community members, having a transect walk, and organising colleague students.

Identification of relevant problems for solution

The main duty of students during the FPP is problem identification. An analysis of the open ended responses of students revealed that participants in the study were coming from different departments within the faculties in the University; consequently, their responses varied considerably reflecting the identity of their respective departments and programmes. While some students indicated that they worked in groups to identify developmental problems, collect data and suggest possible solutions to the identified problems others mentioned that their duties focused on identification of pressing problems that needed to be treated and officially documented for further assistance by the government. Another participant said his duty was going round the community, interrogating them to find their

main grievances or challenges and by so doing, finding ways of addressing their problems confronting them. A participant remarked:

“My main duty was to identify the community’s problems and potentials, and how to help them achieve their goals”.

Other duties include interacting with the people to find out potential problems in the community. A participant said:

“My duty is to find out the community’s problems, know what is pulling down their development and to take the right information about the community”.

Generally, the main duty of students in this regard, is to gather information on the community profile as well as the potentials and problems of the community.

Daily works

Aside the normal routine community study; participants were also engaged in other daily works in the community during the FPP. Such daily works include cleaning, house chores, cooking etc. One of such participants said:

“My duties include cleaning the front view of the community, meeting by the group to know the activities of the day and meeting later in the evening to argue and finalize data”.

Another one said:

“When I wake up early and do my chores like sweeping, arranging our room and also participating in whatever our engagements led us to during the day.

The community’s standard of living

Some other members claim their main duties during the FPP include advising the members in the community on how to take good care of their environment and their health in the society. A participant remarked:

“My main duty in the community during the FPP was living a healthy relationship with the people in the community and undertaking the task that brought me into the community”.

Others assert that their duties in the community were to live with the community members and learn the way they live. A participant said:

“Hahaha, I really know how some rural places in the country live and I also managed to adjust myself in their style of living and my duties were also being a responsible student”.

Knowing their traditions

Others were engaged in finding out about the traditions of the people’s geographical location of the community. A participant made this assertion:

“My duty is to study the life and culture of the people and to collect data on the life and other activities of the people. To write a comprehensive report on the information gathered from the community”.

Educating the community members

Other participants engaged in activities such as visiting farms and teaching children in their respective community as they see their action as part of service to the community. One of the participants had this to say:

“During my stay in the community, I usually go to the basic school to teach”.

Another participant said:

“I went through the community entry process, I had a transect walk and went to the class room to teach because of my program as a teacher”.

Having a transect walk

Participants also engaged in transect walking in the communities for sightseeing and looking out for projects of interest as part of their duties. One of such participants said:

“To identify projects and select any of those projects, at least two of the projects and analyze them”.

Organising colleague students

Some other participants were elected leaders of various groups in the communities during the FPP. Such participants also had other distinctive duties. Some of them were responsible for organising the group and providing responsible leadership. Others acted as chief scribes, interpreters etc. One of such leaders said:

“My duties included making sure my colleagues were well organized before any meeting and taking data from the members of the community”.

A participant who acted as the interpreter of the group said:

“My main duty in my community was to interpret the Twi language into English for my members and English into twi for the community”.

A participant who also acted as the chief scribe said:

“As a group secretary I was always in charge of recording whatever was said at every meeting with the community members”.

The one who acted as the Public Relations Officer said:

“I was like a PRO (public relations officer) between my group and the community people. I posed questions to them and they replied”.

Another one said:

“I was the main channel of communication from the community to the group and from coordinator to the group”.

Research Question 3: How is the FPP Experience relevant to students' field of study?

This research question sought to find out whether the experiences students gained from the FPP are of relevance to their study areas or not. Open ended questions were used here. The responses were grouped into themes for an emergent pattern.

Participants were initially asked to indicate whether FPP is relevant and explain how the experiences are relevant to their areas of study. Participants admitted that the experiences gained during the FPP were relevant. They also indicated the manner by which the gained experiences are relevant to their programmes of study. Because participants were drawn from different programmes of study, their responses varied considerably reflecting their programmes of study. Participants whose field of study is education generally admitted that yes, the experiences gained during the FPP are relevant to their area of study. It has helped build up their knowledge, encouraged and made them have more confidence in their area of study. A participant said:

“Yes, experiences gained are very relevant to my field of study because my area has to do with educating young ones, therefore, I will encounter many people. The FPP has prepared me towards that”.

Another participant said:

“Yes, they are related to my field of study because I assisted the teachers so I got the chance to experience some of the difficulties they face and working with children with disability”.

Similarly, participants whose field of study is Development Education also acknowledged the relevance of the FPP to their area of study. They contend that Development Education is about creating awareness on issues pertaining to development and that is basically what the FPP seeks to achieve. A participant said:

“Yes, the experiences gained during the FPP are relevant to my field of study, since I am a Development Education student; I have learnt how to educate people which will improve their development issues”.

Another participant remarked:

“Yes, the experiences gained during the FPP are relevant to my field of study because as development practitioner, you need to gain these experience to enable you carry your task when posted as a worker”.

However, a participant had a mixed feeling about the relevance of the FPP to his field of study and said:

“Yes, the experiences I gained in the FPP are relevant to my field of study in some sense. On the other hand, I offer a course that deals with children and I am asked to count buildings, I think that was not relevant”.

Participants were also asked to indicate relevant experiences gained from the FPP which they think should be included in their programmes of study. Participants had varied views about

the relevant experiences gained from the FPP which should be included in their programmes of study. While some are of the view that nothing should be included in their study area as everything is already included, others are of the view that community studies should be included in their area of study, since this will help students to have more knowledge about how to live and relate with every community. Some other participants thought more practical work should be included in students training and oral assessment of students should be included. A participant remarked:

“Students should be assessed orally than assessing them on paper. Because during the FPP, I realised that children in my class were able to explain things better orally than on paper”.

Findings

1. From the analysis of the data collected it was found out that participants perceive the FPP as an experience that every student needs to go through. Since the experience acquired through the FPP in the community was different from their earlier thinking about the community and also reminded them of their origin.
2. The study also revealed that participants actually participated in the just ended FPP where they were given orientation before the FPP about the programme and this orientation had helped in no small measure in aiding participants to adjust to the communities in which they were posted to.
3. The study further revealed that the experiences participants gained during the FPP were relevant and participants indicated the manner by which the gained experiences are relevant to their programmes of study.

DISCUSSIONS

The study found that those who participated in the FPP were given orientation before the FPP about the programme and this orientation had helped in no small measure in aiding participants to adjust to the communities in which they were posted to. It is often noted that placing trainees on field experiences is a critical stage in the training process (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx 1996). Field experience is one of the most common “real world” learning experiences implemented in many institutions (McGlenn, 2003). Many institutions integrate more field experiences into their programs and increase the number and variety of sites in which students are placed (Black & Ammon, 1991; Garibaldi, 1992). In University for Development Studies, the Field Practice Programme is an integral component of the university curriculum. Students in various programmes are expected to participate in the FPP. This is in line with what other institutions do in pre-service teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1996; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). Though highly regarded in the education of teachers, field experience has a controversial history, with respect to its impact on teacher learning (Zeichner, 1992). Studies reported negative outcomes of field experience, including changes in student teachers’ attitudes (Mahan & Lacefield, 1978) and the development of bureaucratic orientations after student teaching (Hoy, 1977).

The study also found that participants perceive the FPP as an experience that every student needs to go through. Since the experience acquired through the FPP in the community was different from their earlier thinking about the community and also reminded them of their origin. The findings of the study can be explained in the context of informal education which often takes place outside a traditional classroom setting, such as in community-based organizations, libraries, at home, or in museums (Farrant 2004, McGivney, 1999). According to Farrant, in informal education, learning takes place outside school setting and arises from the activities and interests of individuals and/or groups. Informal learning can be planned learning, such as a presentation or workshop organized in response to identified interests and needs, delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings. The finding can be also explained in within the context of the theory overlapping sphere of influence of Epstein (1992) which suggests that certain agents of which students' academic achievement is part, have mutual interest of each other and are best attained via their concerted partnership. This perspective is represented by three spheres-schools, family, and community and their connection is determined by the attitudes and practices of the people who are located within each environment (Epstein, 1992). The theory suggests that there is the need to strengthen the link between home, community and school since students succeed when both the internal and external influence intersect and work together in promoting students' learning and development. Fostering a strong connection between the school, home and the community has a positive impact on the academic outcomes of students. "Families, schools and communities are most effective if they have overlapping or shared goals, missions, and responsibilities for children" (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996, p. 270). When the school, family and community have similar goals and aspirations for their children, there is intersection between the various domains, and students' outcomes. This intersection can occur at institutional level or at individual level (Epstein et al, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn

1. Participants perceive the FPP as an experience that every student needs to go through since the experiences and skills acquired are relevant to students' fields of study which is beyond the confines of the classroom setting.
2. It can also be concluded that during the FPP, students learn and perform different factions and adopt different coping mechanism which are necessary for their future careers.
3. It can also be concluded that the orientation given to participants prior to FPP contributes to the success of the FPP.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authorities should make the FPP an interesting experience that students will be willing to undertake since many students found it difficult staying outside the comfort of their homes, selection of the communities should be voluntary.

There should also be incentive package for students serving in deprived areas to motivate them to stay. Reward system should include contributions of students to the communities they serve.

It is also recommended that assessment procedures in the FPP should include oral presentation and sampling views of the community members since this will make students' contributions to the community feasible and authentic.

Suggestion for Future Research

Future researchers may consider examining the relevance of the FPP in the context of development and challenges associated with the management of the FPP.

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