

# A Collaborative Self-study of Action Research Supervision: How can Mentorship be Used to Improve In-service Teacher Training in Uganda?

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**Abstract** It is not just a learning crisis but a teacher crisis! While Sub-Saharan Countries in general and, Uganda in particular, are grappling with poor learning outcomes at all levels, the ability of teachers and school leaders to respond to the learners' needs to raise learning outcomes remains a major challenge. Teacher quality plays a central role if Sub-Sahara African countries are to accelerate early grade learning and raise retention in the subsequent grades. The purpose of this study was to explore how a collaborative self-study can be used to galvanise teachers and school leaders' capacity to improve their practice through action research supervision. This study describes how a collaborative self-study was used in the supervision of action research using a mentorship process. We provide a retrospective account of our reflections on the actions and experience with our students (teacher trainees) during our research supervision. We present a collaborative self-study as a study method with a discursive power of generating research knowledge and improving our practice and that of the teacher trainees. In this self-study, we focused on our work with a sample of 13 (7 female, 6 male) teacher trainees. This research indicates that while self-study is faced with challenges of unfair competition from traditional research methods, it can be helpful in contextualising teacher education.

**Keywords:** *self-study, action research supervision, teacher mentorship, teacher education, Uganda*

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## 1. Introduction

Interest in self-study and its methodology continue to grow as many teacher educators find it useful as a "systematic approach for examining and improving their practice" ([1], p. 20) as well as that of their students. While supervising teacher trainees doing action research projects at Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGIHE), we wanted to understand, reframe and improve our practice of supervising teacher trainees and their action research projects. Focusing on teacher trainees pursuing a Diploma in Primary Education and Certificate in School Leadership and Management, we sought to answer two evolving questions: (1) What can we learn from our joint supervision of teacher trainees doing action research projects? How can this impact our practice? (2) What can our teacher trainees learn from their action research project? How can this impact their practice? Just like action research, in this self-study we inquired into problems associated with practice, engaging in cycles of research and systematically collecting and analysing data to improve practice [2].

## 2. Characteristics of Self-study

[3] conducted a content analysis of the 1st Castle Conference in which the conference participants had raised significant questions about the nature of self-study and what constitutes or characterises it. According to his analysis, the self-study scholars were characterised with openness, collaboration and reframing. He described how self-study researchers must have a disposition that is open to ideas from others, and how collaboration plays a critical role in self-study. Through dialogue and collaboration with other teacher educators and students, the researcher can frame and reframe a problem or situation from different perspectives [2], p.8].

An open disposition to new ideas was critical for us to unlearn, relearn and challenge our status-quo influenced mostly by traditional pre-determined theories and models of teacher education. For this to happen, we maintained an open dialogue and positive criticism among ourselves (teacher educators). We exchanged our comments and observations about our teacher trainees' action research progress and then had an open discussion about these

comments and observations. Through this, we challenged our individual beliefs and assumptions which is essential for one to improve practice. With an attitude of open disposition, we were able to appraise and reappraise our beliefs and assumptions about teaching, research supervision and our relationship with teacher trainees.

Furthermore, [2] in their review of the self-study literature, noted that self-study is distinguished from other forms of research because it is “paradoxical” (p.8). Whereas self-study is about an individual, we had to engage in collaboration as “critical friends” or trusted colleagues who provide alternative perspectives for reframing, support, and validation [4,5]. In this way, we strove for data validity and credibility through checking data and subjecting those data to colleague’s interpretations and professional critique [6] to make them more contextualised and culturally appropriate to our local practicing community. Therefore, instead of empirical and theoretical evidence and generalisability, we sought to validate our self-study through collaboration and sharing concrete and contextualised exemplars of real teaching and research supervision practices and experiences [7] through which we could refocus our attention to practice and how this practice could influence theory on teacher education.

Like other studies in the qualitative tradition, our self-study is rooted in postmodern philosophy because of its non-linear and unpredictable methods and outcomes [2]. Unpredictability issues from its focus on practice which is often fluid because of changing circumstances and the researchers’ history and dispositions which cannot be fixed a priori and yet “it is never possible to divorce the ‘self’ from either the research process or from education practice” [8], p. 607]. In this study, we view knowledge production as a culturally inclined enterprise and take a reflective and analytical stance and seek to identify the cultural, interpretive, and ideological basis built into our conceptions of knowledge.

### **3. Study Context and Methodology**

#### **3.1. Study Context**

This study is a description of our experiences as teacher educators and our students within two teacher training programmes at Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education, Uganda. The programmes are a Diploma in Primary Education and a Certificate in School Leadership and Management. The Diploma in Primary Education was the first programme the institute started in 2015 and it takes two years for one to graduate. The programme enrolls practicing classroom teachers with an initial certificate in primary education also known as Grade III Certificate in Uganda. The Diploma in Primary Education is also considered an intermediate programme for one to transit from a Grade III Certificate to a bachelor’s Degree in Primary Education.

The Certificate in School Leadership and Management on the other hand is a one-year programme which enrolls practicing school leaders and managers at different levels. These often include school headteachers, deputy headteachers, heads of departments and class teachers. Like the Diploma in Primary Education which is an intermediate programme to a bachelor’s degree in education, one can use a certificate in school leadership and management to enrol for a diploma in School Leadership and Management. Its major aim is to improve school leaders’ and managers’ capacity to address their immediate contextual challenges.

A common feature of the two programmes is an action research project which a student is expected to complete by the end of the programme. After attending and completing a course unit on educational research methods, a student identifies a critical issue at his or her school which he or she wishes to address in the action research project. The student is then assigned a supervisor who guides them in finetuning the study topic, study plan and approaches to address the identified issue. This study is therefore focused on our experiences in supervising 13 students who were assigned to us for supervision and guidance in their action research projects.

#### **3.2. Study Participants**

In this study, we (teacher educators) acted as researchers as well as collaborative participants in the research process. As self-study researchers we inquired into our own practice of supervising teacher trainees’ action research projects while using our experience thereof to generate the research data. This experience was based on our interaction with 13 teacher trainees and their action research projects. We thus purposively selected 13 (Female =07, Male = 06) teacher trainees to participate in the study. Four (Female =02, Male =02) of them belonged to the Certificate in School Leadership and Management while 09 (Female =05, Male = 04) belonged to the Diploma in Primary Education programme. We used two main selection criteria; First, we selected all students who were assigned to us for supervision and were using action research to improve their practice. This was important to the study because we aimed at understanding and improving our own practice in supervising students doing action research. Second, we selected all students who were supervised by both of us (the first two authors) because we wanted to understand our collaborative effort in supervising, guiding and mentoring our students while improving our “self” and practice as teacher educators.

Below we present a list of coded participants with their respective action research topics. For confidentiality, we gave used pseudonyms for the work stations where the participants implemented action research projects. The codes are generated according to the two academic programmes. SLM represents School Leadership and Management and DPE represents the Diploma in Primary Education.

Table 1. Study participants

Participant Code	Gender	Action Research title
SLM01	Female	How can I improve teacher preparation for lessons at Nabweru Primary School?
SLM02	Female	How can I improve students' performance of Geography in Class 3 Naseke Sec. School?
SLM03	Male	How can I improve the students' performance of science subjects at Kyegerwa Sec. School?
SLM04	Male	How can I improve team teaching to promote effective teaching and learning within the Mathematics department Jinja High School?
DPE01	Female	How can I use activity-based method to improve learner's performance in Mathematics in class 4 at Wakiso Primary School?
DPE02	Female	How do I improve literacy in primary one at New Generation Primary School?
DPE03	Female	How can I use stories to enhance teaching and learning in Primary 2 at Wakiso Primary School?
DPE04	Male	How can I improve the discipline of Pupils in class 4 at Goodwill Primary School?
DPE05	Female	How can I improve primary four class parents' participation in school activities at Kampala Primary School?
DPE06	Male	How can I improve handwriting of pupils in primary five class at Generation Primary School?
DPE07	Male	What can I learn from the discipline of pupils at Generation Primary School?
DPE08	Male	How can I improve on sentence construction in English at Goodwill Primary School?
DPE09	Male	How can I improve the hygiene of learners of Class 5 at Great Minds Primary school?

<sup>1</sup>All school names used in this table are Pseudonyms for confidentiality reasons.

### 3.3. Study Methods

We used self-study as a methodology to understand and improve our professional practice. As [9] suggested, the way a self-study might be done depends on what is sought to be better understood, and in this study, we sought to understand, reframe and improve our practice as teacher educators. At the core of this study was collaboration by adapting a research cycle involving co-planning, co-reflection and joint meetings with students. These research cycles lasted a period of 12 months which is consistent with the period of action research supervision. This period started in May 2018 and ended in April 2019. This enabled us to collaborate before, during and after engagement with students to ensure that our suggestion to students was a result of joint efforts.

At the planning stage, we gave each student a Work-Based Assignment (WBA) form with which they collected all relevant information about their envisioned action research projects. The form allowed a student to describe the issue they intended to address such as "improving students' academic performance in science subjects at lower secondary school level." It detailed a proposed title of the issue, the work station and its context, reasons for choosing to address the issue, the kind of data a student envisions to collect as the situation unfolds, sources of data and; application of the issue to practice and or policy. At this stage, we (teacher educators) read together the WBA form to get a common understanding of what a student intended to accomplish in the action research project. We then jointly met the student to get further explanation of the project and then gave collective suggestions for improvement. This allowed a student to focus on educational challenges or issues they found important to them.

At the second stage (action), a student engaged with the planned action to implement the activities as agreed upon with the supervisors. We then worked with individual students in a collaborative relationship in which the students shared their accomplishments or milestones with us on a monthly basis as earlier agreed in the WBA form. Students shared their milestones through WhatsApp, weekly phone calls and emails. Upon receipt of the

milestones, we engaged students with reflective questions to clarify the shared milestones and the next steps to enable students to more deeply observe the issue at hand while developing multiple alternative solutions or options.

Irrespective of how students shared their milestones and accomplishments, we met, discussed and co-reflected on students' work and accomplishments and then agreed on how to advise the student and who of us would communicate to them. Through this, we ensured that we communicated to each student at least every week. Each meeting, whether physical or virtual aimed at answering three main questions: (1) What am I doing and what have I learnt from it? (2) Is there anything that challenges my previous knowledge, beliefs, values, attitude and or assumptions? (3) Is there anything I am doing, or I intend to do differently as result of this activity? Based on these questions as well as being open to other questions and the subsequent reflections, we could easily decide on the next steps. In addition to our meetings, we created a WhatsApp group, in which individual students could post anything related to their action research projects. Through the WhatsApp conversation, we received questions, comments and updates as well as getting a basis of our personal reflection about the effectiveness of our guidance to the students.

The physical group meetings constituted the third stage of the project cycle. At this level, we invited students for an oral presentation of their work to fellow students, research supervisors and other members of academic staff. The first meeting was held three months into project implementation while the second meeting was held after the 6th month. In each of the meetings, students explained what they did in their respective schools, challenges encountered, how they went about the challenges and possible next steps. Participants then suggested possible alternatives to the mentioned challenges, asked questions for clarity and insight into further reflection and or action.

The fourth and last stage involved individual reflection after the last group meeting. At this level, a student made appropriate corrections and or implemented the suggested alternatives offered in the meeting. This could either culminate into a final project write-up or an adjustment of initial project plans to engage in new actions.

### 3.4. Data Type and Sources

We collected data from a variety of sources including our reflective experience, WBA forms, final action research reports and our own reflective experience about the entire study process. At the start of the programme, we gave students WBA forms on which they were to note the study focus/area they sought to improve or the issue each of them sought to address, the rationale for choosing to address the issue, the kind of data they anticipated to collect and how they planned to collect them. We used the students' WBA to understand the challenges they were addressing to improve practice and compared with what they did in improving their practice. We visited each project site at least twice. During the visits, we discussed with the students about the project successes, milestones and challenges. These formed the field notes which enabled us in further understanding of how our students were using action research projects to improve their practice. We generated more notes during students' project presentation. Each student presented their project twice – three months after the start of the project and after 6 months. The presentations enabled us to understand what each student had accomplished, the challenges and the next steps. Based on this, we (supervisors) discussed to draw our joint lessons to improve our own experience in teaching and supervising students' action research projects. We kept our notes presentations and we used these to supplement the data got from the final Action Research projects. We then used 13 final Action Research project reports alongside the corresponding portfolio of evidence. Portfolio of evidence included photos, video clips, meeting minutes, text extracts from learners' books, assessments and learners' performance reports.

### 3.5. Study Trustworthiness

We started the process by engaging our students in dialogical meetings, presentations and discussions. For example, presentations of students' progressive action research project reports and the subsequent discussions gave us feedback about students' challenges and thoughts which enabled us to deeply and critically reflect on our mentorship process. This self-critical reflexivity is a fundamental feature trustworthiness in self-study research [1,10]. We also ensured trustworthiness through a collaborative relationship as critical friends. At the start of the mentorship process, we were open to the students about our collaboration and students were at liberty to send their work to any of us. Upon receipt of a student's work one of us allocated appropriate remarks and then shared with the other colleague as a critical friend. This would be followed by a discussion about the remarks put on the students' work.

Through the created WhatsApp platform, students were able to give constructive criticism and feedback about the action research supervision process as well as their own challenges and milestones. Their comments and free conversation gave us insights of what students thought and felt as the end users of the mentorship process. Through these collaborations, students also formed themselves into a virtual community of practice through which, beyond regularly sharing their progress, giving and

receiving feedback, it helped to authenticate the study process and outputs.

### 3.6. Data Analysis

The analysis of data for this self-study focused on our reflective notes, field notes and students' action research reports. The conversations during our weekly meetings guided our mentorship and supervision decisions and allowed us to engage in preliminary data analysis during data collection to establish initial understandings [11]. Furthermore, our meetings helped us as critical friends to see beyond our own experiences and self in the study. It was a way to check impressions against one another and it added another layer of critical analysis. As [5] writes, 'It is important in a self-study report to demonstrate that different perspectives on teaching and learning situations have been sought, considered, and to (again) minimise possibilities for self-justification or rationalisation of existing practices and behaviours' (p. 16). Each of us engaged in ongoing data analysis as we described our narrative experiences. We did the final data analysis in four major steps. We exchanged our individual experience narratives where each member made a critical analysis of the others' narratives, gaining a general understanding of the entire research narrative. This served to establish interrater reliability and allowed for us to continue to develop our roles as critical friends. We wrote as many codes as possible. We then compared these codes by grouping together similar ones. These groups of codes were then made into themes which we later used to write the final research report. This final analysis allowed us to engage in deep reflection about our second research question: 'What is learned from engaging in a collaborative self-study as critical friends?'

We present a detailed data analysis process below:

#### *Phase 1: Familiarising oneself with data*

The starting point for teacher trainees' action research projects were the problems that they were experiencing in their contexts. These problems included school issues, classroom issues and student issues. The action research documents used were either in soft or hard copy. The portfolio of evidence attached as appendices in action research projects included reflective journals, minutes of meetings and photos. Teacher trainees adopted an interpretivist approach in understanding their role in resolving challenges together with peers and other agents. The analyses were micro level analysis of individuals and events.

#### *Phase 2: Generating initial codes*

The codes were items that were likely to be relevant to the research questions raised. Generating initial codes was done aligned to the study questions raised by teacher trainees in their individual action research projects. The codes generated were: challenges (c1), student issues (c2), other factors affecting challenges (c3), agents and type of institution where the action research was carried out (c4), outcomes of action research, sense of professional collaboration (c5), evidence of reflective learning (c6) and views on the mentorship/supervision process (c7). Challenges were at the level of the school and classroom. Other factors affecting challenges were teacher-student

rations and moral issues. Types of institutions where the projects were carried out were primary and secondary schools. Professional collaboration included establishing links and participating in group activities. Evidence of reflective learning included reframing one's thinking and practice, comparing their past with the present and revising actions. The initial codes generated were compared among the three researchers.

#### *Phase 3: Searching for themes*

This stage involved examining the codes aligned to the identified themes. The initial analysis identified that c1 and c2 could be classified as challenges. Challenges were affected by c3 (other factors) and consequently the outcomes (c5) were a result of actions carried out by agents in the institutions (c4). The results were the sense of professional collaboration (c6), evidence of reflective learning (c7) and views on the mentorship/supervision process (c8).

#### *Phase 4: Reviewing the themes*

In reviewing themes, the provisional themes were identified in a meaningful way by asking which themes could be classified together and which ones were unique. Some themes were reorganized and some abandoned. The provisional themes were challenges (c1), other factors affecting challenges (c2), sense of professional collaboration (c5), evidence of reflective learning (c6) and views on the mentorship/supervision process (c7). The type of institutions and agents involved in the institutions were identified as background characteristics of institutions where the teacher trainees carried out their action research projects.

#### *Phase 5: defining the themes*

Challenges relate to issues which the teacher trainees were trying to address and were the triggers for the action research projects. While trying to resolve the different issues, other aspects (issues) affected the success of the outcomes (c2). The outcomes of the research were dependent on the nature of challenge being addressed which were the sense of professional collaboration (c5), evidence of reflective learning (c6) and views on the mentorship/supervision process (c7). Multiple versions of analyses were created before the final definite themes. The process of discovering the underlying causes to problems was due to deeper reflections between the researchers. The process included deconstruction of the researchers' assumptions, clarifying the underlying rationale, and learning lessons.

#### *Phase 6: Producing the report results*

This phase involved the researchers checking themes identified and relations. The deeper descriptions are explained in the findings section.

## 4. Study Findings

The outcomes of this self-study research reveal lessons for teacher educators, teachers, education institutional managers, and self-study researchers. It also highlights some challenges involved in self-study.

### ***Engaging in professional collaboration***

Besides our (teacher educators) mutual collaboration, teacher trainees also engaged in collaborative work within their respective work stations. To some of them, working

with others helped them to better reflect and improve their practice. For example, one teacher trainee working on a project to improve learners' performance in lower primary section sought collaboration with the teachers of upper primary section for advice and feedback. She noted that,

*though I was the only one teaching Mathematics in the lower primary section, I have so much benefited from working with teachers Mathematics in upper primary classes, while engaging with the question: 'How best can you teach mathematics in your class?' Their feedback has really helped me improve how I now teach mathematics (AR report: DPE01).*

Another teacher trainee working to improve teaching and learning in primary two also underscored how collaborating with colleagues helped to improve her practice and confidence. For her, listening to constructive feedback from a colleague became a turning point in her professional development. She noted that,

*Collaboration with my colleagues also improved my confidence in what I was doing. When the teacher of literacy in Primary three (P.3) observed my lesson on 9th March 2020, during the post-observation conversation she said, "I liked the way you have used the story. I request you to come in my class on Wednesday and see how I will use mine because I want to use some of your techniques you have used. But it was nice, I also enjoyed it and the children were active." This encouraged me and increased my confidence in what I was doing (Interview: DPE03).*

Collaborating with colleagues to improve one's practice could be interpreted as a sign of professional humility which gives rise to the willingness to suppress one's ego and pride to seek professional guidance. For instance, one teacher seeking to improve literacy in English within a multilingual class went out of her way to seek the assistance of a colleague who could better understand the local dialect of some of the learners. She noted in her reflective notes,

*In another scenario, I wanted to teach using a story in a local language (Acholi) which I personally did not know. So, I requested my colleague, who is an Acholi native speaker. In doing so I was able to reach out to my learners in a more authentic and practical way (Reflective Journal: DPE03)*

We took this as a positive step in the professional development of our teacher trainees, especially if a teacher training programme is to bridge the theory-practice gap. For example, one teacher trainee noted in an interview,

*I also learnt that collaboration is a hall mark of quality teaching. Apart from helping me to understand and improve my own practice, collaborating with colleagues and school administrator enabled me to deeply understand the challenges of literacy and comprehension in my class (Interview: DPE08).*

To some other trainees, collaboration was a source of motivation, especially where one collaborated with a school administrator or head of department. For example, a teacher trainee noted how his collaborative work with a colleague was appreciated by the school Director of Studies. He noted,

*I went to class (S.4) with Mr Abaho and Madam Gladys and the teaching was done. After the lesson, the*

*Director of Studies called me and told me that the learners reported to him that the lesson in S.4 was very good and requested me to continue with the same spirit which meant that learners loved being taught by many people (AR report: SLM04).*

In the last example above, the Director of Studies served to confirm to the teacher trainee's affirmation of the effectiveness of his team leadership and initiative.

Although we constantly encouraged our teacher trainees to use collaboration as a means of improving their professional practice, it was not always an easy task. We observed that the traditional competitive spirit often overrode their collaborative attempts. This was more pronounced in schools where teachers are awarded for learners' performance in the end of cycle examinations and in situations where teacher promotions are based on individual performance rather than team performance. For example, one teacher trainee noted,

*Some members in the department took long to appreciate the idea of team teaching. One member in the department could not accept to go with another mathematics teacher because he never wanted his learners to say that they are being taught by other teachers when parents came to school to check on learners' academic progress. Parents often want to have a special talk with the specific mathematics teachers who teach their children, and, in the end, they give financial token of appreciation to them to encourage provide remedial assistance to their children in form of coaching... Another member who was teaching a candidate class never wanted to be with any mathematics member in class reason being that at school when UNEB results come, all teachers whose students have distinctions in their subjects are given distinction awards which is an appreciation for the extra efforts and care offered to the candidates of that particular class, which depends on the number of distinctions obtained in a particular subject and this money is given to the subject teacher (AR report: SLM03).*

### **Reflective learning**

Through this self-study, we realise the significance of reflection in our own professional development as well as that of our teacher trainees. For us, "thinking together" gave us a method for learning, novel ways of working with our teacher trainees as well as unlearning our old ways of working. For example, one of the researchers noted that,

*I have learnt that helping these students to complete their action research projects requires that I completely put aside my assumptions and beliefs about teaching and even research. These students always have something novel that we can learn from. What we need is the spirit of listening and patience to understand what they are doing, how they are doing it so that we can give appropriate support (Reflective notes: Researcher 01).*

We developed listening skills and patience mainly after much interaction with our students (teacher trainees) and reading their life histories. This enabled us to understand their past and how this has impacted their professional practice. It was interesting to understand how many of

them did not want to join the teaching profession in the first place. For example, one student noted that,

*My dream career was Nursing or electrical engineering course after my Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE). However, after receiving my UCE results with only passes in science subjects, I had no alternative but to join the Primary Teachers College (PTC) due to financial challenges of my family (AR report: DPE09).*

Our regular conversations with this teacher trainee who was working on a project to improve learners' personal hygiene revealed to us that ever since he joined the teaching profession, he had not fully appreciated his self and practice as teacher. Consequently, he often blamed his professional challenges on his learners – as if he did not have a role in them. However, through regular conversation with him about his action research project, he appreciated the need to get more involved in the life of learners beyond giving the lesson content. In his final project report, he noted that,

*I have realised that these learners require something more than the subject content. Talking to them about their family and personal life greatly improves their self-esteem which I consider as an important step for one to work on and improve one's hygiene (AR Report: DPE07).*

Reflecting on their life histories as teachers, enables them to appreciate their own journey as persons and professionals. We found this as the key starting point for many of them to appreciate their own beliefs and assumptions about the teaching profession and how they can improve their practice. For example, at the start of the research project, one trainee noted that "my initial training at the teachers' college did not improve my attitude towards the teaching profession" (AR Report: DPE03). Besides appreciating their professional journey, this trainee's assertion indicates her growing awareness that the traditional training at teachers' college is overly detached from school realities and contexts which teachers are bound to face in their professional practice. However, self-study tends to refocus the attention to contextual realities as well as the self. As we worked with teacher trainees on their research projects, the same trainee who had lamented that her teacher training college did not help her improve attitude towards the teaching profession noted that, *while I initially blamed pupils for their poor performance, I have later realised that much of what pupils do in class and their performance depend on me and my actions (AR Report: DPE03).* This was revealed from another trainee who wrote in her research report, *Failure to read printed texts, pronunciation and articulation of words was majorly a result of limited methods I used which did not cater for all skills of learning, that is to say, listening, speaking, reading and writing (AR: Report DPE02).*

The study further confirmed the long-standing understanding of the central role of the teacher-student relationship. This is not only essential at the primary and secondary school levels. Teacher-student relationship is equally important at post-secondary levels including teacher education. Although we had initially conceived it just as part of methodology to have frequent communication in form of phone calls, emails and meetings, it proved to have a more fundamental role in

improving the relationship with our students [teacher trainees]. By removing or at least reducing our “distance” from the trainees, they were able to communicate to us and request for any clarification at any moment they required it. This not only went beyond conversations about their research activities, but also any classroom or school-based practice. Our trainees were also free and encouraged to share their personal aspirations and challenges. For example, during our meetings and phone call conversations, some of the in-service teacher trainees told us about their families, their plans for further studies. This also used to happen with our students of the previous class – 2018/2019. Two of the students who later enrolled for master’s degrees at other Universities (Makerere and Kisubi) are actively communicating with us about their progress and challenges related to the programmes. Others openly and freely discuss with us their family programmes such as weddings and other celebrations. We find this relationship with in-service teachers essential to teacher education and mentorship because in educating others how to educate, it requires more than technical skills and competences – it takes the whole “I” – including the emotions, feelings, the entire “self” as well as the relationship with others.

The study also revealed that self-study can enhance in-service teachers’ flexibility as they study and improve their own practice. Whereas self-study enables teacher educators to study and improve their practice, it also enhances teacher trainees to flexibly apply the course content to their contexts. For example, while one student was researching on how to improve his team leadership within a department of mathematics, he went on to research on how to improve teacher-student relations in the department. In his reflective journal, he noted,

*I realised that we, teachers, have always imposed some things onto the students to ensure that they perform well. By forcing them, we scare them from consulting us and sharing their challenges with us* (Reflective Journal: SLM04).

After this realisation, the teacher trainee started to work on improving teachers-students’ relationship to improve students’ learning outcomes.

#### **Flexible mentor-mentee relationship**

While traditional research and teacher education approaches have majorly focused on pre-determined teaching and learning methods, this self-study research reveals the significance of a flexible coaching and mentorship approach. Through a flexible mentorship process, both the teacher educators and teacher trainees treat one another as professional colleagues while appreciating individual contributions. This appreciation does not end when one completes the programmes but rather continues to form a strong professional relationship. For example, one teacher trainee wrote to her action research supervisor noting,

*I cannot thank you enough for being such a wonderful mentor to me over the past two years for my studies. I want you to know how much that has meant to me. Your guidance and support have been instrumental in helping me achieve so much personal and professional*

*growth during this period* (AR Report: DPE03).

We also learnt that mentoring teachers doing action research requires more than technical methods and techniques. Rather, engaging teacher trainees in a supportive relationship, providing constructive feedback, engaging them in discussions, challenging, questioning and approving their actions and propositions aimed at improving their practice and learn from their own actions. This moreover is not a linear process as the context of action research projects as well as the students’ (teacher trainee) experience impact the process and given the high number of teacher trainees for mentorship, it became a huge challenge as it required us to shift our thinking and thoughts from one project to another. This challenge was highlighted by one of the mentors, saying,

*I faced a challenge of finding ample time for my students’ supervision since I had many other students with different projects and contexts. This made it quite difficult for me to completely commit to each student and fully journey with them in their research study* (Reflective notes: Researcher 02).

Another mentor (researcher) in a different statement noted that,

*I have learnt that supervising students’ action research projects is equivalent to doing action research itself. It is not just giving the directives to the students but rather one needs to work with them on concrete steps in resolving educational issues* (Reflective notes: Researcher 01).

Accompanying teacher trainees in their action research projects thus, required us to build strong and meaningful relationships with them. This relationship was important in this study as it helped us have the teacher trainees willingly access and accept our constructive criticisms and work on them for their own professional development and improvement of practice. This can be related to what [12] referred to when in her book, ‘the Courage to Teach’ noted,

*Here is a secret hidden in plain sight: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning* (p.21).

Providing mentorship to teacher trainees was, however, not as easy as it might seem. It was always difficult to disengage our teacher trainees from the long-standing tradition of “studying to complete, write a report and get a grade”. We however kept reemphasising to them the importance of action, reflection and lessons beyond the grade. This later led many of them to appreciate the improved practice and the need to continue improving. For example, one teacher trainee researching on how to improve her classroom practice using activity-based methods in teaching methods noted, ... *children are enjoying my lessons, they are working together and developing friendship. I feel this is how I should be teaching every day* (AR Report: DPE01).

## 5. Challenge

Like any other post-modern approach to research, self-study research faces a challenge of “unfair” competition with traditional approaches. This is more pronounced when one is teaching self-study to others. While our students showed great attraction to self-study research, their research work was more influenced by traditional approaches. For example, some of their work reflected some rigidity to their initial plans. Instead of building on their reflections to plan for the next steps of their research, some of them remained focused on their initial plan, irrespective of whether it worked or not. Like traditional approaches to research, some of the students did various activities but it took them time to get used to constant reflection and interpretation of their own actions and practices as a form of data analysis. To overcome this challenge, we provided more coaching and mentorship instead of only teaching.

Teachers in Uganda have a long tradition of focusing their teacher-training on the goal of certification and promotion. This goal is not negative in itself. But when teacher trainees exclusively focus on certification, they pay more attention to the examination content than seeking mechanisms to improve their own self and practice. This phenomenon was pronounced especially among students of the diploma in primary education. They initially viewed their teacher education programme merely as a step towards getting a higher qualification. Upon realising this, we tagged their reflections and all activities of their action research to the course grading and certification. In this way, through their initial attraction to raising their grades, they dived into deeper reflections about their work and made tremendous improvements.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

In this article, our research question was: how can we use a collaborative self-study within the mentorship of teacher trainees doing action research in Uganda? In answer to the question, we found that through a collaborative self-study, teacher educators can improve their own practice as well as that of teacher trainees by seeking new and innovative pedagogical approaches and use leadership and subject content to tackle their classroom situations and challenges. Self-study is an innovative way through which teachers can understand and solve their professional challenges without surrendering to the temptation of relying on teacher educators’ conclusions and recommendations or texts which often do not work well within teachers’ local contexts.

We found that teacher educators can use self-study to encourage teacher trainees to reflect on their self, own practice and that of others [4]. Through this, teacher trainees can seek and get their own motivation to improve their practice in a more systematic and collegial way. This is based on a critical and objective reflection on their work and that of others as they question the status quo while seeking alternative approaches to what is taken to be conventional in the teaching profession. This arises when there is a gap between what they are and what they would wish to become in practice [9,13]. In this way they are intrinsically rejuvenated to surmount any challenges

which might stand on their way towards their own professional growth and improvement of practice.

When teacher educators and teacher trainees engage in self-study, they can develop a professional and mutual relationship through which they can rediscover their internal strength which is critical to their wellbeing as individual persons in search for self-fulfilment. Literature also shows that teachers’ wellbeing improves their efficacy in their professional practice [14]. Teachers’ efficacy has positive effects on teachers’ effort and resilience towards difficult situations within one’s practice. This can develop through a positive relationship, in which teacher educators are humble and receptive, and can create safe spaces for teacher trainees to positively adjust and improve their practice [15]. We find this relationship between teacher educators and teacher-trainees a fundamental shift and development in teacher education. It is a drastic shift from superior-inferior relationship, a giver-receiver relationship [16], to a collegial relationship. Through a collegial relationship, teacher educators equally learn from teacher trainees as teacher trainees learn from teacher educators. This also implies that teacher education institutions (colleges or universities) are no longer the only sources or centres of knowledge but schools can as well feed universities and teacher education colleges with knowledge.

Engaging teacher trainees in action research could be a better option for teacher educators in countries or societies where teachers mainly join in-service courses to gain credentials and certification for promotion [17]. Action research “pushes” teacher trainees to go beyond the certification requirements and look at “who” they are and how they can work on their beliefs and assumptions, improve their own self, their practice and that of others [4]. In this way, in-service teacher training serves its goal of improving their professional practice.

For long, teacher education in poor resourced contexts has been less contextualised: often relying on reading texts and materials developed from developed countries [17]. This often limits in-service training teachers’ capacity to translate what they study into their professional practice. We find that action research enables teacher trainees to engage with their immediate circumstances and contexts and draw lessons for their practice. They are able to engage with their immediate professional and or personal challenges and systematically search for solutions which would have otherwise been difficult while using conventional teacher education approaches.

## Suggested Areas for Further Research

This study was limited to teacher trainees within a training programme in Uganda. It would be interesting to explore the application of action research and mentorship on teachers’ Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes at school level.

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