

Theory to Practice: What Teacher Trainees Did Not Expect From Their Practicum Experience

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ABSTRACT

The teaching practicum plays an important role in the process of introducing pre-service teachers to the teaching profession which ultimately guides their professional growth. This paper explores and articulates an understanding of the experiences trainees go through during the short 12-week placement in schools. A study was carried out to get insights into the experiences and challenges they go through via the reflections written starting from week 1 until week 10. The trainees were asked to reflect on their experiences based on four categories: 1) teaching and learning, 2) relationship with the school administrator, 3) relationship with the mentor, and 4) relationship with the supervisor. A total of 25 teacher trainees' reflections were analysed and key terms were coded and grouped according to the categories identified. The findings revealed that the teacher trainees' experiences with regard to their teaching practicum were generally positive. However, there were also some inconsistencies found from their writings particularly with their expectations concerning their role in the school and their relationship with their mentors as well as supervisors. The kinds of challenges and unexpected experiences faced ranged from interpersonal to pedagogical issues. Some suggestions on improving the quality of the teaching practicum process within the program are discussed.

Keywords: mentor, school experiences, supervisor, teacher trainee, teaching practicum

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INTRODUCTION

The practicum constitutes an important part of teacher training and is highly valued especially by student teachers who are seriously considering pursuing a career in teaching. It plays a major role in bridging “theory and practice” as well as offering the context for student teachers to develop their personal teaching competence (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005, p. 291). Although the aim of the practicum varies, essentially it is a process of acquiring and developing the knowledge of teaching and professional content knowledge of teachers (Shulman, 1987). It is through the practicum experience that students are provided with authentic hands-on experience in teaching which aims to develop their teaching skills and important traits such as knowledge of themselves, knowledge of people and interpersonal skills. The experience gained during this stint also teaches soft skills such as independent problem-solving, esprit de corps, and professional attitudes.

THE ROLE OF TEACHING PRACTICUM

In the Malaysian context, aside from the faculties of education in public universities, the teacher training colleges also provide teacher training for teachers to be absorbed in government schools. The Economic Transformation Program initiated by the Malaysian government in 2010 which aims to transform Malaysia into a high-income nation by 2020 puts teacher training as one of its priority areas in meeting its objective. One of the policies made clear was to raise the standards of the country’s teaching profession by increasing the quality of teaching and improving the welfare of teachers. It is without a doubt that the practicum in many of the teacher education programs strives to improve the quality of education and promote the professionalisation of teachers.

Many studies have attested to the importance of getting teacher trainees to experience teaching formally in a school and adapting themselves to a new environment as an induction before graduating with their degrees and diplomas. Shulman (1986) stresses the role of content knowledge in the process of becoming a competent teacher. In fact, he adds that not only is content knowledge essential, trainees are also required to possess pedagogical knowledge as well as pedagogical content. The importance of possessing these elements characterises professional knowledge for teaching and that “mere content knowledge is likely to be as useless pedagogically as a content-free skill” (p.8).

Marais and Meier (2004) emphasised that teaching practicum encompasses a wide range of experiences teacher trainees go through within the context of classrooms and schools. It is an important part of teacher training that reflects the quality of instruction shown by the trainees as they progress in their studies towards becoming an effective teacher. Wang, Haertel and Warburg (1993) also believed that the quality of instruction which includes classroom interactions and classroom management possesses effects in relation to students’ cognitive competencies and their achievement. However, it is also generally agreed that teaching practice is domain-specific as well goal-specific where it depends on the cultural context and professional traditions.

It is an undeniable fact that the practicum requires teacher trainees to commit themselves to the profession and a high degree of emotional involvement becomes essential while trying to immerse themselves in the school system. As they try out and try to link what was learned in theory to practice, challenges and obstacles are inevitable. There have been several studies conducted to better understand the challenges faced by the trainees. Ong, Ros, Azlian, Shanti, and Ho (2004), for example, stated that pressures faced by the trainees during the practicum had “prevented the students from positively engaging in theory and practice” (p. 3). The

trainees indicated that the challenges faced included conflicts about mentor and mentee relationship, confrontations with the supervisor and heavy non-teaching workloads.

Goh and Matthew (2011) identified four types of concerns teacher trainees mentioned in their journal reflections namely, issues concerning classroom management and student discipline, problems trying to adjust to the institution, as well as classroom teaching and student learning. Md Yunus, Hashim, Mohd Ishak, and Mahamod (2010) stated that the challenges faced made it difficult for them to integrate theory and practice. In their study, it was found that cultural differences, applying the right teaching methodology, students' discipline as well as the relationship with mentors and supervisors were some of the challenges the trainees had to deal with. Without a doubt, some issues need to be addressed concerning teacher trainees' experiences and their teaching practicum.

THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN TEACHING PRACTICUM

During the practicum period, teacher trainees feel engaged, challenged and even empowered by the kind of responsibilities they have to shoulder that may leave them questioning their ability to teach or whether they have what it takes to become a teacher. Teaching practicum is the time these trainees experience formal teaching for the first time and therefore, many uncertainties and the unexpected which more often than not paints the realities of the classroom. As part of the teacher education program, most teacher trainees are required to reflect on their teaching practicum process. Pickett (1999) and Richards and Lockhart (1997) stated that in most teacher training and preparation programs, reflective practice is used at pre-service as well as in-service levels of teaching. They added that some of the tools used for reflection include dialogue journals, diaries, learning logs, audio-video recordings and others.

The concept of reflective practice dates back to the early 1930s when Dewey (1933) stated that reflective thinking "involves a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty in which thinking originates and an act of searching, hunting and inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt and settle and dispose of the perplexity" (p. 12). The concept is emphasised further by acknowledging the involvement of evaluation and decision making and in the context of teaching and learning, these notions are critical in making the teacher trainees aware of the importance of reflection in an effort to maximise the benefits of the practicum experience. In a more recent concept, the role of reflection in teaching necessitates a questioning disposition and critically thinking about one's teaching techniques, goals, values and beliefs about teaching, and the teaching context itself (Minott, 2010).

The main aim of engaging in a reflection is to increase the quality of one's teaching. The ability to question creates an awareness of the teachers' assumptions about what teaching is as opposed to the realities of what happens in the classroom. The self-assessment done in recollecting the teaching process helps the teachers determine their strengths and weaknesses as well as the factors contributing to the success or failures in their teaching. The process of reflection allows them to learn from the experiences by asking questions related to the *how*, *why*, and *what* of teaching and learning. It gives them the opportunity to think back about the way the lesson was carried out and to be consciously aware of their past actions in order to rectify the weaknesses or improve further the actions for the future. The ability to make informed judgments through reflection enables them to identify strategies to improve their lesson delivery. As they reflect on their teaching experiences, they develop different sets of skills and abilities. According to Loughran (2011), the interplay between experience and reflection leads the teacher trainees to derive meaning in ways that enhance understanding of the teaching setting which ultimately has a dramatic impact on the teacher's teaching outcomes.

Despite its importance, much remains to be learned about reflective practice about the practicum experience. Although it is imperative to learn about how individuals learn to gain knowledge, think, and feel as a way to gain insight into how teacher trainees deliberate on their thoughts and action, there are not many studies on reflection for introspective inquiry particularly on the use reflective entries. The studies conducted involving reflection which focused on journals or entries had found various positive effects where the teachers were able to record their insights in the form of reflective reviews and narrations. Writing entries daily proved to be useful in fostering in-depth thinking about what and how they learned or things that they might have overlooked in their lessons.

It is worth noting that most reflections are done as an individual activity which requires a systematic and structured way of thinking as well as the ability to describe and be critical about one's actions. In the context of this study, the teacher trainees are practically novice teachers with little experience in the classroom and therefore, it was important to ask them to write according to the predetermined categories. The trainees need to set aside some time to mull over the classroom activities and incidents that happened in the school. Gaining an understanding of the experiences these teachers went through and examining their insights reflects the rationale for the current research as a preamble to increasing the quality of teacher education.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to examine teacher trainees' teaching experiences and challenges with the teaching and learning process, school administrators, mentor as well as supervisor. It is imperative that teacher trainees' perspectives on their teaching practicum experiences be highlighted to improve the quality of teacher training. The 25 teacher trainees who participated in the study were a cohort of students pursuing their Bachelor of Education degree majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). They were in their final year of the degree program and were required to undergo the teaching practicum in their 8th semester. The research design adopted a phenomenological integrative methodology that gave priority to the participant's subjective meanings (Etherington, 2011). Data was collected through reflective entries produced from week 1 until week 10 of their practicum. The trainees were asked to reflect on their experiences based on four categories: 1) teaching and learning, 2) relationship with the school administrator, 3) relationship with the mentor, and 4) relationship with the supervisor. The reflections produced were read and deductive coding method was used to identify codes which are reflected the themes that emerged.

In this study, the teacher trainees were instructed to write their entries and this was conveyed to them before they started the first week of the practicum. A briefing was held informing them that they needed to write their reflections based on the four categories mentioned earlier. They were told that the purpose of doing the reflection was to think back "about what one has done and looking for systematic ways to consciously be aware of past actions in order to amend or correct the actions for the future" (Maarof, 2007, p. 207), a definition of reflection that the researchers had adopted for the study. They were also briefed to write about their daily teaching experiences in the classroom and their experiences in the school they were teaching. The analysis of the data collected from the reflective papers was done to extract the key points expressed during the practicum and to find out the nature and pattern of their reflections.

The duration of the teaching practicum for the B.Ed. (TESL) program was approximately 12 weeks and the researchers were all involved with the supervision of trainees during the practicum. The trainees were instructed to complete their reflections which they began

writing from week 1 until week 10 and hand in their reflection papers at the end of their 12-week teaching practicum. Twenty-five teacher trainees handed in their reflection reports which were written in the English language and there was a total of 300 entries were analysed. The reflections were read and re-read to determine a commonality in the thoughts expressed which were later coded into keywords descriptive of the emerging perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES

After analysing the data from the reflective papers and the trainees' teaching and learning experiences, two perspectives emerged namely *lesson delivery* and *learning environments*. The approaches used in the lesson delivered by the teacher significantly affect the teaching and learning outcomes. Initially, the trainees were taken aback as they expected that the teaching approaches used would win the students over. As they reflected, the teachers expressed concern over the fact that perhaps they had assumed that the activities prepared would work well only to find out that some of the approaches used had its limitations. One TESL teacher trainee conveyed what she had to do during a speaking activity:

"I showed them pictures and mind maps and yes I could see some improvement. It was very hard for me to maintain their interest in the lesson because some of them did not even understand simple English. I thought I used simple English but still, they cannot understand me. Whenever I used English, the next second I had to translate for them in Malay. I need to do a lot of 'homework' on how to maintain their interest in the lesson."

Another teacher indicated that:

"I felt relieved because although I didn't get access to the LCD and I couldn't print out the worksheets, I managed to conduct my lesson by pasting the mahjong paper on the wall. But I got angry with some students because they were ignorant while I was teaching and they did not finish their homework on time. I really need to think on any other approach so that they will focus on the lesson and complete their homework." (SA., TL)

It is clear that there is a concern about the need to use creative approaches in teaching particularly with students of different proficiency levels. One teacher recorded her success in using various approaches when starting her lesson during the set induction:

"Set induction for all the classes I teach will be different. This I learned when I realised that whatever materials I had used for 4A cannot be used for 4B. For class 4A, I ask questions, use pictures or use flashcards. But for class 4B, I had to PowerPoint because that was the only way to get them interested! I showed a video to the students and they were very excited. (Mi., TL)

However, some expectations set were met as trainees succeeded in carrying out their lessons as planned. One trainee reported that she gave her students "an interesting task of creating their product which can do just about anything and try to sell it to their peers. The activity was engaging as they had to be creative in coming up with the most unique product and for the first time I can see them getting excited doing the English language activity."

A positive *learning environment* in the classroom will allow learners to feel comfortable and engaged. A conducive learning environment will enable them to develop positive aspects

of learning, be focused and more open to active participation in class. One teacher trainee wrote that at first, he had thought if he could get close to the students, they will listen to him and the teaching the students would not be a problem. The teacher assumed that if the teacher has a good rapport with the students and they are allowed to become responsible for their own learning, students would more likely to be self-motivated. However, he reported that:

“It seems that all my efforts are wasted! I prepared for them everything I could but they still aren’t motivated to learn. I give up!! (Ju., TL)

In addition, they were other concerns such as passive learners and teaching approaches that did not work out well as expected. One teacher overcame these problems by changing the seating arrangement of the class she was teaching. As she mentioned in her reflection: “I find this particular technique useful because my students have stopped making noise and have started to pay more attention during class.” (AB., TL)

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

A good and trusting relationship between teachers and the school are essential in fostering a positive culture within the school environment. Research has shown that a good relationship between teachers and school administrators makes a difference in encouraging school improvement and maintaining the required standards (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Maeroff, 1993). In schools where trust and cooperation are strong, students report that they feel safe and know that the teachers care about them. After analysing the data from the reflective papers on teacher trainees relationship with the school administrators, two perspectives emerged namely *attitudes of staff* and *positive organisational culture*.

It is a known fact that among other responsibilities, school administrators, in particular, the school principal, must welcome teacher trainees and formally introduce them to the entire school as well as generate a relaxed atmosphere in the school (Fish, 1989). Also, a strong sense of community and positive attitude among the school staff will engage new teachers to feel motivated and have a feeling of belonging to the school. One teacher reflected:

“The school greeted us warmly even though we were very new in school. The Principal met all of us face-to-face and gave us great advice. He explained about the school’s background, the teachers whom we’ll be working closely with and most importantly the students. He answered all of our questions with patience and humour.” (Su., SA)

It is important to have a consistent approach in behaviour management in the school setting as positive staff attitudes towards teacher trainees is central when creating a good school climate that supports teacher trainees in accomplishing their tasks (Steer, 2009). He added that a team of staff who are caring and an effective leader ensure that their teachers are given appropriate time to carry out their task and have adequate administrative support. However, one teacher expressed her concern as she reflected:

“She wasn’t welcoming at all. I was searching for her for about a week to properly introduce myself, but she wasn’t around. When I finally met her, she didn’t seem friendly and welcoming at all. I definitely didn’t expect this.” (JC., SA)

In another instance, another teacher trainee reported:

“My partner and I were called by Mdm A and she asked about the materials for the project. When we told her that she had already informed us that it was cancelled, she

suddenly accused us of “putting words in her mouth”. She accused us of saying the things she never said before and honestly, that really caught me off by surprised.” (Ri., SA)

It is highly essential that administrators foster teacher trainees’ growth by building on quality relationships that hinge on effective communication and a positive attitude. A positive attitude means among others respecting co-workers and having positive regard for each other as individuals and for the work each does. In this case, when a senior teacher exudes negativity in the workplace, there is likelihood that this will sap teacher trainees’ energy and positive outlook.

A positive organisational culture is dependent on several factors such as teachers’ commitment and support from co-workers, parents, and school administrators (Crosswell & Elliot, 2001). Although most of the trainees in the study reflected they enjoyed the experience of being a part of the team where they were given assignments to oversee or handle schools activities or projects, other trainees also reported about not getting the support of the senior teachers. One teacher trainee wrote in one of her reflections:

“There are teachers who are nice, but there are some who are unhelpful. With teacher X, I tried to exchange time with her so that we can do our invigilation by my lecturer but she wasn’t willing.” (MN., SA)

It is evident that the findings of this study concur with Deal and Peterson's (1999) study who claimed that schools that practice high organisational such as having the same goals and display good relationship with the surrounding community will increase teachers’ commitment in schools. However when negative attitudes infiltrate the organisation, it affects the whole work culture and in this case, teachers who are starting in their career become less engaged.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR MENTORS

The role of mentors in the teaching practicum context is to provide guidance as well as promote the growth and development of teacher trainees. Beginner teachers essentially have to learn the ropes of teaching while on the job. Lasley (1996) emphasised that mentors are critical supporters that provide hope and optimism during the teacher trainees’ teaching practicum period. In the context of this study, the trainees’ reflections revealed that *collegiality between mentor-mentee* is a central feature of a successful induction process. As one trainee expressed:

“I have the chance to learn from the other teachers as they share their experiences in the meetings. They make it a point that everyone else understands and will patiently explain their points to other teachers. My mentor always encourages me to speak up and share my opinions on the topics discussed. That made me feel like I was part of the team.” (To., M)

Other teachers reported that their mentors were also supportive and accepting of trainees as they “*will spare some time to meet us when we have doubts or questions*” (Ka., M) and empathise with them and asks “*how’s the lesson so far?*” (Wa., M) or “*are the students treating you right?*” (Pu., M). The reflections given are in agreement with the fact that mentors also serve as a collegial and emotional supporter during this challenging phase of a trainee’s career.

However, there were concerns over whether mentors can maintain a trusting professional relationship as one trainee recounted her experience when someone spread an

ugly rumour in her school. She expressed: “*The sad thing was that my mentor did not use the proper channel to handle the situation and in the end, all the teachers knew about this rumour that’s been going around. I felt so embarrassed and to make things worse, all the male teachers seemed to shy away from me...I thought what they did to me was unfair. This was a shock to me.*” (AS., M). Mentorship is supposed to be a crucial form of support for beginner teachers but in this case, the trainee’s mentor was not attentive or sensitive in expressing care for the trainee’s emotional and professional needs. According to Gay (1995), a mentor is someone who facilitates and assists another teacher’s development and when there is a conflict, what a beginner teacher needs is a mentor who is willing to be her advocate and understands the problems she is facing. It must be emphasised that the quality of collegial bonding or trust between a mentor with his or her mentee will either positively or negatively impact the mentee’s potential and continued growth as teachers.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR SUPERVISOR

Supervision of teacher trainees during their teaching practicum represents an important component in teacher education programmes. One of the roles and responsibilities of an educational supervisor is to support by overseeing the education of the trainee and ensuring the trainee gets the proper guidance concerning the practicum. Educators consider the practicum period a highly valued experience that provides teacher trainees with the opportunity to incorporate fully both the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching (Kauffman, 1992). Numerous research on the assessment and evaluation of student teachers during their teaching practicum have been carried out to determine the supervisors’ expectations and the standards set when observing the trainees (Chen, Mason, Staniszewski, Upton, & Valley, 2012; Deering, 2011; Parker & Volante, 2009).

In this study, from the trainees’ reflections, two perspectives emerged namely *lesson planning and preparation* as well as *emotional support from the supervisor* as an important criterion for assessing practicum performance. The trainees’ reflections revealed that effective planning and preparation before a lesson is an essential aspect of teaching practice. When a trainee plans a lesson carefully and the effort put forth in preparing the materials provides the necessary confidence in one-self. As one trainee expressed:

“On Thursday, my supervisor came to my school to observe me. I am glad that I have prepared mentally and physically to be observed by him. Planning is definitely important and I am glad I was able to manage my time. I received a lot of positive comments than negative comments from him and all in all, I think my preparation paid off!” (Mi., SV)

Another teacher mentioned that her supervisor gave some useful feedback on how her “*questioning techniques*” can be improved and “*not to include too many exercises in a single period English class.*” The feedback made her realise that planning a lesson takes time and requires careful thought. In her reflection, she contemplated how much work goes into preparing a lesson as stated in one of her reflections:

“Will the activities be suitable for my students’? How should I use the strategies as taught by my lecturers? I underestimate how much preparation I must do. My supervisor also expects me to prepare teaching aids to support my lesson.” (Li., SV)

The findings indicate the importance of effective supervision as emphasised by Subedi (2009) where practicum teachers’ performance hinges on adequate dissemination of

information and training on lesson planning and preparation. Sufficient practice in lesson delivery, classroom management, communication skills, and evaluation procedures is crucial to augment English language teaching and learning.

The supervisor's emotional support also plays an important role during the trainees' practicum period particularly in meeting the expectations and standards set by their lecturer. While the practicum supervisor is expected to help the trainee put theory into practice, regular communication or conferences with the practicum teachers are also necessary to talk about their experiences at the school. According to Al-Mekhlafi and Naji (2013), the supervisor must boost the morale of practicum teachers who are still at the novice stage and take interest when they are struggling either personally or professionally. As one teacher trainee reflected:

“My lecturer seemed disappointed because I did not perform well during my first observation. When I explained to her about my problem in adapting with the teachers and the school, she seemed uninterested....” (No., SV)

It can be frustrating and demotivating when a supervisor shows very little empathy in understanding the problems faced by trainees and this will definitely impact their relationship. According to Intrator (2006), the supervisor's support during the practicum can be a conflicting, dynamic and fragile one. The mismatch between the teacher trainees' versus the supervisors' expectations on how the practicum should be assessed as well as the quality of feedback given can affect the trainees' performance. As one trainee expressed:

“My supervisor said my lesson plan was good, as it was brief and clear but I still need to improve my teaching and learning methods. I thought I could meet my supervisor's expectations but I was wrong. I was confident about my lesson plan and I thought the students enjoyed the class. According to my supervisor, I have little knowledge on literary themes and devices and I was unable to teach effectively. I know I have much to improve but I didn't expect my supervisor to say something like that about my teaching.” (Bi., SV)

The trainees' reflected that their relationship with their supervisors which hinges on the emotional support given as well as the planning and preparation that goes into a lesson before delivery can be described as one of the most important dimensions of the practicum. As mentioned by Arnold (2006) and Bourke (2001), effective communication, motivation, cooperation, good quality feedback, and supervisors' willingness to accept the responsibility of facilitating teacher trainees' professional growth will undoubtedly increase the trainees' chances to learn more from their practicum experience.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Findings from this study showed that in general there were situations in which the teacher trainees did not expect and were not ready when faced with challenging situations related to their teaching practicum. Based on the themes drawn from their reflections which were written using four categories namely, 1) teaching and learning, 2) relationship with the school administrator, 3) relationship with the mentor, and 4) relationship with the supervisor; it was evident that while the trainees valued the opportunity to experience teaching in schools, they also voiced concerns about the challenges that occurred during the stint. Some of these challenges include: underestimating students lack of English proficiency, their lack of interest in learning the language, teaching strategies that did not work and not knowing how to

“troubleshoot”, school teachers who are not supportive, as well as not getting the emotional support from their mentors/supervisors. It is interesting to note that while some trainees were able to be critical and descriptive in writing their reflections, there were also reflections which had been written just for the sake of fulfilling the requirement and not much were revealed despite the briefing given before the practicum. Despite that, it can be implied that the weekly reflections that were written helped the trainees to identify the positive and negative aspects of their teaching practicum.

An implication that can be drawn from this study includes exposing TESL teacher trainees on how to reflect better upon their practice. Explicit training on the writing of reflective entries while undergoing their courses at the university can create much-needed awareness on becoming a successful teacher. By reflecting on their practices, the trainees can identify their strengths and weaknesses and explore ways and means to better their *art of teaching*. What they discover in the stories they write every time they reflect on their teaching could be the key to unlocking their true potential of becoming a successful teacher.

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