

Issues and Concerns Faced By Undergraduate Language Student Teachers during Teaching Practicum Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study examined specific issues and concerns faced by Bachelor of Education student teachers majoring in Language and Literature during their 12-week teaching practicum experience. Specifically, three main areas of concerns were examined. They were (1) specific issues and concerns related to the implementation of teaching practicum faced by the student teachers. (2) Effect of interactions with the mentor teachers and faculty supervisor on the effectiveness of the practicum experience, and (3) the expectations of the mentor teacher and faculty supervisors on the performance of the student s during their practicum experience. The findings indicated that student teachers were concerned over a series of instructional, administration and student management issues during their practicum experience. Besides, the interactions with their mentor teachers and faculty supervisors, and their expectations of their student teachers seemed to have affected the performance of the student teachers during the practicum experience. The concerns they expressed in study therefore were genuine and they must be duly addressed by the faculty supervisors, mentor teachers, faculty management, faculty curriculum developers and school management.

Keywords: *Teaching practicum; English Language Teaching; issues and concerns; supervision, mentor teachers, faculty supervisor, qualitative case study*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice, or commonly known as teaching practicum, is a compulsory component of Bachelor of Education programme at Faculty of Education. The experience is a part of a young teacher's journey to be a teacher. It aims to equip the student teacher with the relevant and appropriate practical experiences of being a teacher. It is an academic requirement for a student-teacher to be recognised as a qualified teacher. This thus enables him or her to teach at a secondary school, public or otherwise.

The student teacher will be placed at a secondary school for a twelve week duration under the supervision of a mentor teacher (appointed by the school) and a faculty supervisor from the university. He is expected to be present at the school for the whole practicum duration. He plans a twelve week scheme of work and his daily plans for teaching with the assistance of his mentor teacher. The mentor teacher will review the student teacher's lesson plans, observes his teaching, and writes reports on the student's teaching performance. The mentor teacher guides and assists the student teacher in his teaching. He also gets further assistance from his faculty supervisor

This qualitative case study explored issues and concerns faced by twenty (20) Bachelor of Education (majoring in Language and Literature) student teachers of a private university in Malaysia during their twelve week teaching practicum experience. It also examined the effects of their interactions with their

mentor teachers and faculty supervisors and the expectations of the mentor teachers and faculty supervisors on the performance of the student teachers during the practicum experience.

RELATED LITERATURE

Student teachers faced a lot of issues while they were on their practicum experience. Some of the issues and concerns were content knowledge, classroom skills, school culture and setting (Loche, 1996); the implementation of managerial and instructional practices, assuming the role of instructional leader, and undergoing evaluations (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999), and expectations of faculty supervisors and mentor teachers (Woods & Weasmer, 2003). Harwell and Moore (2010) highlighted concerns like inconsistencies in the actual and expected practicum experience, the amount of work, and the pressure felt during the practicum experience. They indicated that student teachers seemed to be most concerned about their ability to perform successfully in the practicum experience and they had unrealistic or inaccurate expectations of the practicum experience. Han (2008) found from eight teacher trainees reflective journals that the student teachers were concerned over lesson planning, establishing good rapport with school management and staff, parents, students as well as community, classroom management and getting support from teacher and lecturer mentor. Tuli (2009) asserted that practicum experience was a "stressful experience" the teacher trainees and they mainly faced the following concerns: low budget, assessment centred, loss of support or inadequate support and disciplinary problems Goh and Matthews (2011) identified eighteen concerns which they combined into four themes: classroom management and student discipline, institutional and personal adjustment, classroom teaching and student learning.

The student teachers were also concerned with observations of and interactions with their mentor teachers during their teaching practicum. These would include the constructive criticism they gave related to lessons and instructional strategies and opportunities to work with diverse student populations provided by mentor teachers, successful implementation of the existing discipline system, comfort levels during observations conducted by the mentor teacher and faculty supervisor, and the overall value of the practicum experience (Harwell, D.R. & Moore, 2010). It was also identified that the practicum experiences could be enhanced when the concerns of student teachers were addressed and acknowledged (Power & Bogo, 2002; Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; cited in [Harwell, D.R. & J.L. Moore, 2010](#)). Renwick (1992) indicated that some student teachers performed less satisfactorily due to their problems pertaining to the quality of mentor teachers, linking theory and practice and supervising lecturers.

Besides, the expectations of mentor teachers and faculty supervisors and the manner in which they are conveyed to student teachers can affect the performance of their practicum experiences as well (Harwell and Moore, 2010). Numerous studies have been conducted indicating "clearly the existence of differential teachers' expectations for individuals within their classrooms" (Rubie-Davies, 2006). Brophy (1982, cited in Rubie-Davies, 2010) reported that expectations make an overall positive or negative difference to student achievement of 5% and argued that while this may be small, the accumulation of such an effect over a number of years could have a marked influence on student achievement. Woods & Weasmer (2003) emphasized on the importance of developing open and clear channels of communication between student teachers and mentor teachers. They stated that student teachers interacted more with mentor teachers than with faculty supervisors. Their findings indicated these communications are beneficial and supportive, and that the mentor teachers expected student teachers to function as exemplary role models for students, develop empathetic, caring relationships with the students, cultivate a passion for education, create constructive relationships with parents and guardians, exhibit professional behavior at all times, and demonstrate flexibility (Woods & Weasmer, 2003). Harwell and Moore (2010) further explored the manner in which the expectations of the mentor teacher affected the quality of the teaching practicum experience. The majority of participants (84.8 %) indicated that their expectations of the knowledge they would gain from the practicum experience and those of the cooperating teacher were similar. 82.3% of the participants also reported that their mentor teachers communicated these expectations clearly. 92.4% of the respondents indicated that they felt that the cooperating teacher communicated the importance of developing a love of teaching and 81% said that their mentor teachers have successfully conveyed the importance of establishing rapport with parents and caregivers. 93.6% of

participants agreed that their mentor teachers expressed the necessity of maintaining and showing professionalism at all times.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

This study examined specific issues and concerns faced by Bachelor of Education student teachers majoring in Language and Literature during their 12 week teaching practicum experience. Three areas of concerns were examined. They were (1) specific issues and concerns related to the implementation of teaching practicum faced by the student teachers. (2) effect of interactions with the mentor teachers and faculty supervisors on the effectiveness of the practicum experience, and (3) the expectations of the mentor teachers and faculty supervisors on the performance of the students during their practicum experience.

The following three research questions were addressed in the study.

1. What specific concerns related to the implementation of teaching practicum were faced by the student teachers?
2. What were the effects of the interactions with their mentor teachers and faculty supervisors on the effectiveness of the practicum experience?
3. What were the expectations of the mentor teacher and faculty supervisors on the performance of the students during their practicum experience?

Participants

The study involved twenty (20) undergraduates of Bachelor of Education (majoring in Language and Literature), from a private university in Malaysia. They were Teaching of English as Second Language (TESL) student teachers who were undergoing their twelve week teaching practicum experience at public and private schools for the September Semester.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for the study was gathered through in-depth unstructured interviews.

Qualitative data on the three areas of concerns was primarily gathered through in-depth unstructured interviews with six (6) student teachers, three (3) mentor teachers and two (2) faculty supervisors.

A set of questionnaire (adapted from Harwell and Moore, 2010) was also administered to the twenty (20) student teachers during the last week of their teaching practicum experience. It consisted of a thirty (30) questions on the three main areas of research concerns related to the following: practicum experiences, the quality of the interactions with mentor teachers and faculty supervisors, and the expectations of the mentor teachers and faculty supervisors.

Harwell and Moore (2010) claimed that the twenty-one item questionnaire (Items 1 to 7; Items 9 to 22) was created based upon previous research (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Woods & Weasmer, 2003; Power & Bogo, 200; and Johnston, 1993). The researchers added nine (9) more items (Items 8, 23 to 30) to include items on the impact of mentor teachers and faculty supervisors on the efficacy of the student teachers' practicum experiences.

The student teachers responded to the thirty (30) items based on the following five -point scale: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) moderately agree (2) strongly disagree, and (1) disagree.

An open-ended question was also included in the questionnaire to allow student teachers to provide details and additional information or comments on the issues and concerns.

Data Analysis Strategies

The data was collected over a period of three months involving twenty (20) language student teachers who were undergoing their September Semester teaching practicum. The intention was to explore issues and concerns faced by the student teachers, the effects of their interaction with their mentor teachers and faculty supervisors and the expectations of the mentor teachers and faculty supervisors on their performance during the teaching practicum experience.

The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed on the categories of issues and concerns as specified by the three research questions. The findings were then grouped under three (3) respective headings/themes:

- a) Specific Concerns and Issues Faced by Student Teachers during Practicum Experience
- b) Impacts of Interactions with Mentor Teachers and Faculty Supervisor on Efficacy of Practicum Experience
- c) Expectations of Mentor Teacher and Faculty Supervisor on Quality of Practicum Experience

The questionnaire was analysed, using percentile, for frequency of responses (1,2,3,4,and 5) for the three main areas of concerns faced by the student teachers during the implementation of their practicum experience.

The open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively for additional information and other concerns and issues which were not highlighted by the student teachers, mentor teachers and faculty supervisors in the in-depth interviews.

RESULTS

Specific Concerns and Issues Related to the Implementation of Teaching Practicum Experience

The study indicated that majority of the student teachers expressed numerous issues and concerns over the implementation of their twelve week of their practicum experience. 80% of them had full anxiety at the beginning of their teaching practicum. 60% experienced self doubt during their teaching practicum and 65% faced a great deal of pressure during their teaching practicum.

a) Managing Class control and Student Discipline

Majority of student teachers were concerned over the student discipline and misbehaviour in the classes. They were worried about the following matters: disrespect for their teachers, bullying, and truancy.

A student teacher claimed that majority of students were with attitude and discipline problems. She admitted that, "Even though they are been punished by the discipline teachers also still behaving on the same way. They are not scared with the punishment". To her, "I do face the problem during my earlier weeks of the teaching practicum. It was a big challenge for me to handle a number of students".

Another admitted, "Until the end of the practicum, the Form Four students still bully us. Even though we are teachers, they don't want to call us teachers. They used specific terms to call us. Sometimes they go like "Hey, girl". And they will play a song or sing along. We cannot do anything. We cannot scold them".

A student teacher claimed that she "found that a boy who was in my class frequently played truancy and this has made me angry and disappointed".

On most occasions, the student teachers admitted that they had difficulty in handling these misbehaved students in their classes.

"(The) Form 4E students who hate English were very difficult for me. They do not even understand

the word 'funny' and how to spell the word 'plant'. I used various methods to actually grab their attention, but only a few responded well".

One student teacher even admitted that she was 'sexually harassed' by the student.

b) Lesson Planning

Some student teachers felt that they had 'boring' lessons. They were worried they would not be able to engage their students inactively. Their students wanted "lots of activities". They required more input from the faculty supervisors on their lesson preparation, especially for a mixed ability classes. Also, they needed more input on classroom and time management. They felt the "the lecturers need to concentrate more on the lesson plan, especially the set induction until the closure, how they are going to present the lesson".

c) Managing Relief Teaching

Attending to relief teaching was a major concern among the student teachers during their practicum experience. They were being instructed to be teacher substitutes when a 'qualified' teacher did not turn up for the classes "at least 3 or 4 relief classes in a day". They realised it was very different from having their own group of students as they were well-prepared for the classes. As a relief teacher, there was very little time for planning as they were only informed in the morning of the same day at the start of the school session.

Attending to relief teaching "highly pressured them" during their practicum, leaving them "little time to prepare for their teaching or write journal to reflect on their lessons". Kamsiah, for example, was given only one class to teach English for her practicum; all the other times she spent at the school to cover relief classes. Some student teachers claimed that they had "done 25 periods a week" including their official teaching periods.

d) Teaching and Learning Facilities and Resources

Majority of the student teachers were concerned with the lack of facilities, equipment and teaching-learning resources provided in the schools. They indicated that they did not get adequate ICT support from the school during their teaching experience. The school also lacked teaching aids such as radio and videos. Furthermore they had to spend a lot on these resources Ramsey, for instance, claimed that she spent RM50 a week (or estimated RM400 for the whole practicum duration) to print and copy her teaching worksheet tasks and handouts. Her school did not provide the service. She also claimed that her school was not well equipped with ICT teaching facilities, and most of the time, she had to fix the LCD projector herself for her teaching. In fact they would be charged ten sen for each paper photocopied.

e) Disruption of Lesson

Class disruption was another major concern of the student teachers. Most of the schools allowed "school activities (club and society meetings, sports training, fire drills) to be carried out during class time" which affected "classroom lessons".

"It caused me to carry forward my lesson to the next class", a student teacher claimed. "I have a number of lessons pending. I had used my free time to replace all the lessons to enable me to complete the lessons within the time given. The school should reconsider about the (school) calendar to ensure no clashes between academic and co-curriculum activities. It distracts the students' learning process".

Others were also concerned with the disruption of classes due to frequent announcements and co-curricular activities made during her class hours "... the club and society meetings, , kawad kaki (foot drill) , the fire drills, and the assembly took our time.

The co-curricular activities “ forced us to carry forward our lessons

A student teacher lamented, It is the time management. When I just want to start the lesson, they got the announcement. “Latihan kebakaran (Fire drill) ”. And then I want to start my lesson, another announcement. Latihan Kawad Kaki. (Foot drill). Yes, The teachers will come and call the students. And then for the next class, the students will say, “Teacher, we have learned today. Can we replace the class? I don’t have to but somehow I have to replace the lesson”.

Another observed,

“During the practicum, I found that the students entered class very late especially after the assemblies and from the laboratories. They will be late for about ten minutes to class and after that they will start to look for chairs and tables”.

f) Teaching Practicum Administration and Management

The student teachers also expressed their concerns over the administration and management of the teaching practicum.

- i. There was no notification about faculty supervisor before the start of the practicum. Hence, students teachers were no observed in the first month of the teaching practicum. Details of the student practicum (timetable, maps, school calendar, etc) could not be sent to them earlier.
- ii. “Getting the permission from the school to do my practicum. I had to wait for
- iii. a few days to get the answers from the school and the faculty did not inform me to actually call the school direct to ask about my application” .
- iv. “We had no (teaching practicum) log book. My senior assistant was not happy when I submitted my lesson plans in a file. She said it was not so systematic”.
- v. The student teachers also indicated that the Faculty should call them to reflect on their practicum. “It is better if the practical teachers can have a meeting once or twice a week during the practicum session to share opinions, etc.
- vi. “Management of the time table was not really good. I think that the school should have given the time table as soon as a person enters the school as a practicum teacher. If the timetable was given earlier, it would be easier for me to plan my teaching and learning for my students

Effects of Student Teachers’ Interactions with Mentor Teachers and Faculty Supervisors on Effectiveness of Teaching Practicum Experience

Effects of Student Teachers’ Interactions with Mentor Teachers

The survey instrument indicated all the student teachers felt comfortable being observed by their mentor teachers. They admitted that their mentor teachers provided them useful guidance prior to their teaching a lesson. They had also provided them opportunities to expand their knowledge base by allowing them to experience a variety of instructional situations and work with diverse groups of students. Their mentor teachers had given them constructive criticisms after they taught their students, hence enabling them to gain a better understanding of the teaching process. They claimed that their mentor teachers were able to guide them well.

The following testimonies indicated the help they received from their mentor teachers:

“I learn from my mentor. Everyday she asked me, how was my class? She advised me, (and) she would go through my lessons. I am very glad, I’m blessed to get a mentor like her”.

“Whatever we need they give us. Regarding the lesson, classroom management and the activities, how we are going to do the activities. They explained to us. She was very helpful and supportive. She treated us as colleague”.

“They motivated us; (they) gave us encouragement and supports, ideas as well. She will let us enter her class as well, she’s teaching the first class. She will let me enter her class and see how she teaches them. So I get the ideas from her. Then I do the same thing with my class. She will come into my class and see how I am teaching them. She will also take my lessons, and she conducts it in her classes. She also gave many materials, and books”.

Since they were being supervised every week by their mentor teachers and other teachers, they “became more confident, prepared and comfortable during my teaching”.

Effects of Interactions with Faculty Supervisors

The data also showed that the student teachers improved their teaching from the comments made and interactions they had had with their faculty supervisors. Most student teachers indicated that their faculty supervisors offered helpful suggestions related specifically to instructional and methodological issues. They gave them constructive criticisms after their teaching to help them to better understand the teaching process. The supervisors showed them “where we did our mistakes, and show us how we can learn from the mistakes”. They “pointed us where we are going”.

Majority of the students indicated that their faculty supervisors offered them useful guidance before they began their lessons. They also indicated that their faculty supervisors consistently supported them during their teaching experience. Overall, they felt comfortable to discuss with their faculty supervisors the problems that they faced during their practicum experience.

Expectations of Mentor Teachers and Faculty Supervisors on the Performance of Teaching Practicum Experience

Overall, all the student teachers admitted that their mentor teachers have made clear to them of their expectations during the practicum experience. All student teachers felt that they shared similar expectations of information they gained from the teaching practicum with their mentor teachers. 95% of them agreed that their mentor teachers have conveyed to them the importance to develop a love of teaching. 85% mentioned that their mentor teachers have successfully communicated the importance of building rapport with parents. 95% of them indicated that it was important for them to demonstrate professionalism at all times during their practicum experience.

Likewise, all student teachers have also admitted that their faculty supervisors have communicated their expectation with them. They have also indicated that their faculty supervisors have expected them to demonstrate their professionalism at all times during their teaching practicum experience. All agreed that their faculty supervisors have established that it was importance for them to develop a love for teaching.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exploring issues and concerns faced by the student teachers during their teaching practicum experiences will enable teacher educators and trainers to manage the practicum experience programme better. Research studies have found that several issues and concerns related to student-teachers' practicum experiences helped to improve practicum experience among undergraduate students. This study, while ascertaining the findings of previous research studies, highlights issues and concerns faced by the student teachers in the Malaysian classroom contexts. It provides a rich data for the Faculty of Education to review the teaching practicum curriculum for its course content, supervision and evaluation. It therefore enables a continuous improvement to be made on the teaching practicum curriculum and quality of supervision by mentor teachers and faculty supervisors.

The study indicated that student teachers were concerned over a series of issues during their practicum experience: instructional practices and management concerns, students' discipline, and class control. Besides, the interactions with their mentor teachers and faculty supervisors, and their expectations of their student teachers during the practicum experience seemed to have affected the efficacy of the practicum experience of the student teachers. It was indicated that they have improved their

performance during the practicum session. The concerns they expressed were genuine and they must be recognised and acknowledged by the faculty supervisors, mentor teachers, faculty management, faculty curriculum developers and school management.

Darling-Hammond (2000) reported that “teachers who have had more preparation for teaching are more confident and successful with their students than those who have little or none”. He also mentioned that programmes with extended clinical preparation would produce teachers who are both more effective and more likely to enter and stay in teaching. Hence, it is important that Faculty of Education and Social Sciences “to evaluate the issues related to practicum experiences and provided suggestions for improvement of these vital, authentic learning opportunities” (Johnston, 1993) in order to prepare the student teachers for effective teaching.

- a) The faculty has to address the specific concerns faced by the student teachers during their practicum experiences. Faculty Curriculum Committee should review the Practicum Experience course to accommodate the students’ concerns and voices. Methodology Courses should allocate more time for microteaching to give them more practice in teaching before the students actually go out for their practicum. Microteaching must be made a prerequisite before their practicum experience.
- b) Teachers educators should communicate honestly with student teachers with regard to the actualities of educational setting (Hartwell and Moore, 2010). They should be exposed to the practical realities of the classroom context.
- c) Knowledge, experience and commitment to work should be the main criteria in selecting and assigning mentor teachers to student teachers. Only qualified mentor teachers should be appointed as mentors to the students.
- d) Proper and extended briefing and workshops to be organised for student teachers, teachers, school management and faculty supervisors on the art of effective supervision and mentoring.

More in-depth studies should be carried out to explore the specific concerns faced by the student teachers during the practicum. As the research indicated the student teachers were concerned mainly over class control and student discipline resulting in ineffective class control and management. They also felt that they should be more prepared and informed of the actual classroom situations, and their predicaments over their methodological concerns while they were at the university. In-depth studies should also be conducted to explore the root cause of these concerns.

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