

Owning the Classroom: Student Teachers' Experiences and Concerns during Practicum

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ABSTRACT

Various ways are adopted by Malaysian teacher training institutions to link theory with practice, among which is the practicum. The practicum stint allows student teachers to explore their capabilities and put what they have learnt into practice. However, quite often student teachers face various problems during practicum which can demotivate them from becoming excellent teachers. This qualitative study aims to look into a group of 25 B.Ed. TESL student teachers' concerns in terms of the preparation, teaching and evaluation stages of their 12 week practicum stint. It also focuses on student teachers' ability to bridge theory and practice in terms of teaching methodology and pedagogy. Two types of instruments are used for data collection; open-ended questionnaires and document analysis consisting of student teachers' reflections. The study also looks into the role of supervisors and cooperating teachers in providing support for the student teachers. Finally, the study unpacks the effectiveness of the pedagogical skills learnt in managing the practicum.

KEYWORDS: concerns, ESL student teachers, pedagogy, teaching practicum

Introduction

The need to produce quality teachers has been a main concern for over a decade and this is seen as essential in shaping the country's future generation. In Malaysian context, producing committed and quality teachers is considered necessary in nurturing lifelong learners as aspired by the Malaysian Educational Policy. Many ways and means are promoted in teacher training institutions to educate the future teachers on the best ways to achieve the country's aspirations. These include providing the appropriate teaching methodology and pedagogy supported by theories for the student teachers to apply in the real classroom situation. However, having this knowledge does not guarantee one to be an excellent teacher. Wright (2002) argues for the need to bridge theory (content knowledge) and practice (teaching) which is much neglected in the education field. This is evident in the teacher training institutions where teacher trainees spend three quarter of their studies in the lecture hall compared to experiencing real teaching in authentic classrooms. Stuart, Akyeampong and Croft (2009) further emphasize the importance of situational knowledge (knowledge that comes with experience through practice) as a more powerful tool compared to received knowledge (knowledge gained through reading). One way to bridge this gap is through practicum an important experience teacher trainees go through which should be heavily emphasized (see also Shulman, 1987; Smith & Lev Ari, 2005 and Schön, 1989).

With regards to practicum, there are multiple studies carried out looking into various aspects. Among them are studies on student teachers' stress level (see McDonald, 1993; D'Rozario & Wong, 1996), teacher concerns (see Christou, Eliophotou-Menon & Philippou, 2004), role of cooperating teachers and supervisors (see Morton, Vesco, Williams & Awender, 1997) and student teacher concerns (see Swennen, Jorg & Korthagen, 2004). Recently, student teachers' concerns during practicum emerged as one of the important aspects necessary for student teachers and educators to reflect on. This is deemed necessary because student teachers lack the exposure to the real classroom teaching despite having the experiences of microteaching in the teacher training institution. Although microteaching is beneficial for student teachers to practice their pedagogical skills in an artificial context, it is said to provide 'a false confidence' since the real classroom situation is not easy to replicate (Gurbuz, 2006, p. 40). This quite often leads student teachers to face various problems in adjusting to the school culture and difficulties in executing real lessons in the classroom.

In Malaysian context, despite a well-documented ELT curriculum, there are issues with regards to the ways the curriculum is implemented in the classroom. There is a gap in transferring the learnt theory into practice. Fatiha Senom, Abd Razak Zakaria and Shanina Sharatol Ahmad Shah (2013) claim that novice teachers in Malaysia do not receive adequate support, as there is no specific new teacher induction programme to prepare them for the transition. A study by Ong, Shabudin, Azlian, Shanti and Ho (2014) on pre-service teachers further identifies supervision, pedagogical and content knowledge as part of the challenges they face in the ESL classroom. Therefore, there is a need to look into the concerns of student teachers during their practicum. The transition period enables them to transfer what they have learnt into practice and helps identify the issues they faced during the process.

This study aims to highlight some of the concerns faced by student teachers during their practicum stint. In addition, the study also raises awareness among teacher educators to address these issues and inform practice. In particular, the study seeks to address the following questions.

1. What were the student teachers' concerns during the practicum stint?
2. How helpful were the supervisors and cooperating teachers in providing support and guidance during the first four weeks of the practicum stint?
3. How useful were the learnt pedagogical skills during the course in managing the practicum?

Literature Review

Addressing professional concerns among student teachers is considered necessary to mold their professionalism. As suggested by Fuller (1969), concerns over one's own adequacy can only be achieved through a real teaching experience. Normally, at the end of the teaching course, student teachers go through a practicum session, whereby they are sent to schools to gain teaching experiences. This will be the time where student teachers' knowledge and acquired theories are tested on their students to gauge their teaching skills. The practical teaching experience plays an important role in either making or breaking a student teacher's interest in teaching. It is during this time the student teachers' propositional knowledge is put to test in the authentic classroom where teaching and learning about teaching are usually articulated. However, these student teachers are also subjected to various concerns which need to be addressed.

Fuller (1969) was one of the earlier researchers who looked into the student teachers' concerns and stressed on the need to address these concerns. The author commented that student teachers' concerns are primarily focused on self and later move towards concerns over their students. Self concerns enable student teachers to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses before they can move on to solving various problems which they will face later on as beginner teachers. This self reflection allows student teachers to be their own analyst in finding the appropriate solutions to their problems.

There are numerous studies conducted on student teachers' concerns. The study by Smith (2000) indicated that student teachers in general have concerns with self (discipline in the classroom management, personal and institutional adjustments, and personal characteristics) and managing teacher tasks (teaching methods and strategies, working with special needs students). A similar study was conducted by Cakmak (2008) on student teachers' concerns toward the teaching process. Based on the questionnaire administered to 156 student teachers in Turkey from various study fields, classroom management was seen as the major concern by the respondents. Besides this, a study by Newlove (1969) identified student achievement and student adequacy as some of the concerns among the 23 junior level education students. The respondents in this study also addressed concerns over their ability to teach their students and their role as teachers. Durgunoglu and Hughes (2010) also identified several issues pertaining to pre-service teachers' readiness in teaching. Focusing on 62 pre-service teachers in the USA, their study identified several issues. Among them were; lack of preparedness to educate the ELL students, little interactions between teachers and the ELL students and lack of support for ELL students in the classroom.

In the Malaysian context, several studies have emerged focusing on student teachers' concerns during practicum. Goh and Mathews (2011) identified four areas of concerns faced by a group of 14 student teachers. They were classroom management and student discipline, instructional and personal adjustment, classroom teaching and student learning. In addition Tan (2008) discovered other concerns such as establishing good rapport and getting support from teachers and lecturers and linking theory and practice.

Despite various studies on student teachers’ concerns over teaching practice, most researchers agree on the importance of such training since it provides opportunities for the novice teachers to test themselves on their teaching capability. This is further supported by Newlove (1969) who recommended student teachers to have these experiences early in their teaching as the art of teaching can only be acquired in the authentic classroom. Similarly, O’Connor and Taylor (1992) suggested that teacher educators need to have knowledge of pre-service and novice teachers’ concerns and address their concerns in order to decrease the rate of attrition of teacher candidates. In brief, the concerns raised by the student teachers in various studies provide added knowledge for teacher educators. Therefore, this study aims to focus on two specific areas of concerns among student teachers. They are pedagogical skills and supervisory support during practicum.

Framework of the Study

This study utilizes the concerns-based model as proposed by Fuller and Brown (1975). This framework is based on earlier work carried out by Fuller (1969). It also focuses on four developmental stages proposed by Ryan (1986) which student teachers go through as they begin teaching. The conceptual framework of this study is depicted in Figure 1.

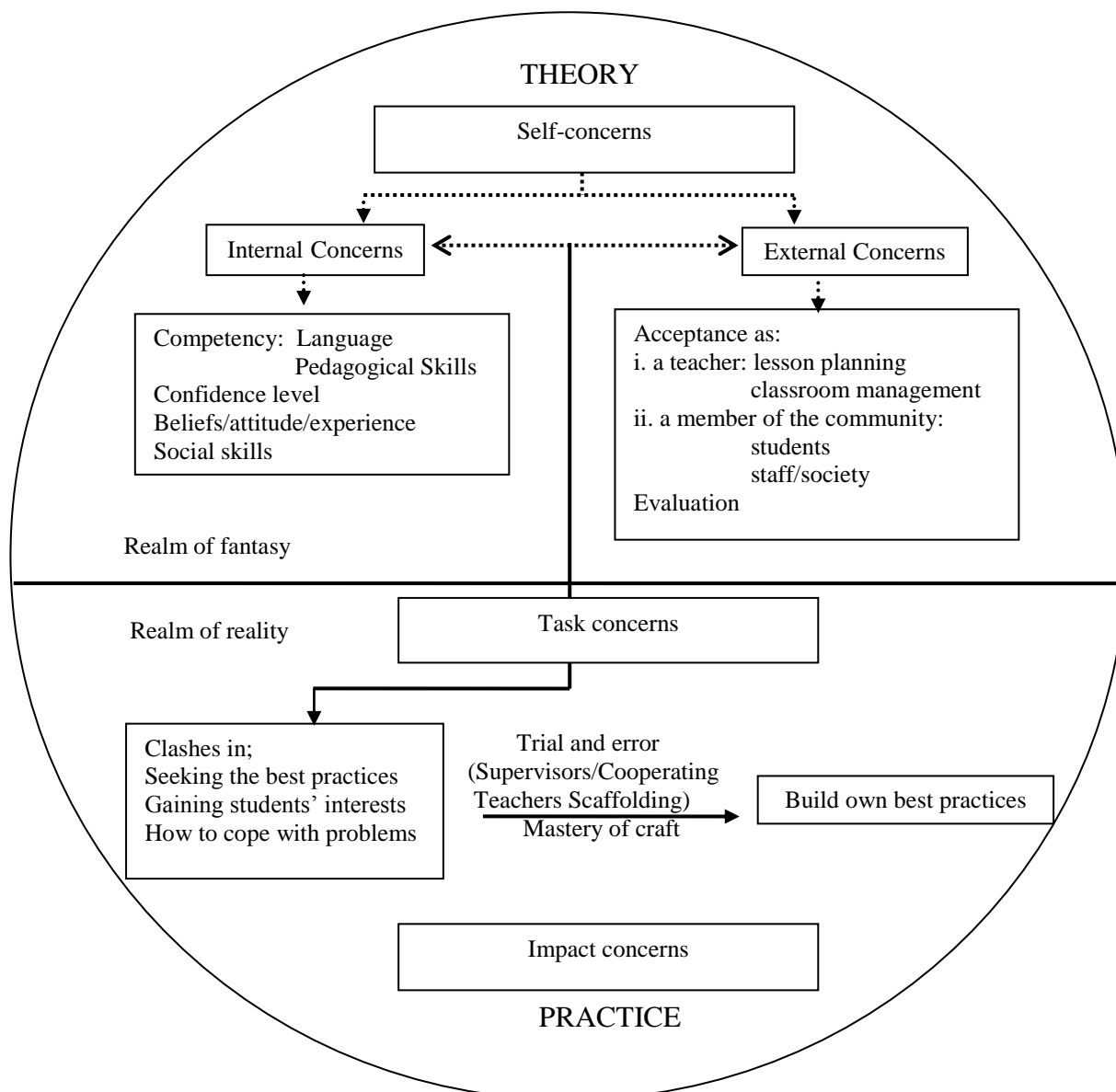


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The first stage as proposed by Fuller (1969) is the self-concerns stage. In this phase, student teachers are concerned with the amount of knowledge they have gained and how these are executed in the authentic classroom. Along with the pedagogical knowledge acquired during training, these student teachers come with their own beliefs and attitude towards what teaching is and how it should be. The external concerns could relate to the types of students they will be facing during practicum, how lesson planning is to be designed and ways of managing the classroom. Besides, they also have their own perception on how to cope with the staff in the school. These concerns fall under the fantasy stage as suggested by Ryan (1986) since student teachers can only assume what and how a classroom would look like based on their experiences.

The second stage deals with task concerns where the student teachers are now teaching in an authentic classroom. Ryan (1986) considers this stage as the realm of reality. This stage deals with the self as a teacher where student teachers are now able to practice what they have learnt in the training institutions. This is the stage where student teachers are expected to put theory into practice. Student teachers are mainly concerned with how to bridge theory and practice by seeking the best strategies, approaches and activities for their lessons. Here, student teachers would question their ability to teach. For example, they would question if they have selected suitable tasks, teaching methods and strategies for the classroom.

At the later stage, student teachers will be concerned with their students where they aim to seek the effectiveness and impact of their teaching on their students. The tasks concerned are focused on the learners' response and academic performance since they are the receivers of the knowledge provided by the student teachers. In this stage, the assistance from supervisors and cooperating teachers is crucial in guiding these novice teachers to identify and implement best practices to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Methodology

Participants

The objectives of this study are to explore the preparation, teaching and evaluation concerns of student teachers during their 12 week practicum stint. This study involved 25 student teachers in a 4 year teacher education programme in one of the teacher training institutions in Malaysia. These student teachers went through 1 ½ years of a foundation course followed by 1st year of B.Ed. TESL programme in the institution. This was followed by a 2 year course (year 2 and year 3) overseas. Upon completion, they continued their final year in the institution where they were required to undergo the practicum session in their final semester. During this time, they were supported and guided by their supervisors (lecturers from the institution) and cooperating teachers (selected experienced teachers from the practicum school). Each student teacher was assigned two classes with a maximum of 12 teaching periods per week where each period consisted of 30 minutes. They were required to plan their lessons and prepare materials to support their teaching sessions.

Data collection and analysis procedures

The study is qualitative in nature and conducted in three stages. The first stage is the pre-practicum stage. The participants were required to attend a pre-briefing session of 5 days just before they embarked on the first practicum stint in their respective schools. The pre-practicum briefing was organized by the practicum unit in the teacher training institute, with the aim to help and provide guidance for these young beginner student teachers on the requirements and process of the practicum as a whole. During the pre-practicum session, the

participants were given input on the areas that they needed to focus on such as teaching methodology (which includes classroom management and lesson planning) and school matters (such as working with colleagues and adapting to the school's needs). As part of the session in the pre-practicum briefing, the participants were also required to address their concerns with regards to practicum. The participants' concerns were gathered via the use of a questionnaire.

The participants were required to complete a questionnaire focusing on three main areas of concerns; concern on preparation, concern on teaching and concern on evaluation before they embark on their practicum stint. The questionnaire consisted of the following open ended questions:

- a) What are your concerns in teaching?
- b) What are your concerns in preparation for teaching?
- c) What are your concerns in the evaluation of practicum?

The second stage took place after the first four weeks of practicum experience in schools where the participants were required to return to their teacher training institute for a mid-practicum briefing session. This mid-practicum briefing session lasted for five days in which participants were given the opportunity to discuss and share their initial practicum experiences in their respective schools. During a mid-practicum session, participants were required to once again, record their experiences during the first four weeks of their practicum. A second questionnaire was distributed in which these participants indicated their experiences as initial teacher trainees as well as described their classroom experiences. The participants were given the second questionnaire consisting of open ended questions based on eliciting data on their first four weeks of practicum experience. The questions are as follows:-

- a) What concerned you most during the first four weeks of practicum?
- b) Was your supervisor /cooperating teacher helpful in providing you with adequate support and guidance? Did you face any problems?
- c) Were you able to use any of the strategies/approaches/theories taught during the Foundation/B.Ed. TESL Year One to Year Four in managing your practicum? Explain.

The third stage was carried out when the participants returned to the teacher training institute to undergo a final 5 day session of post-practicum briefing. During this session, they were given the opportunity to present and share their experiences with their peers. Participants were also required to submit their weekly reflections (12 weeks). Data from the reflections were used to categorize their practicum experiences and concerns in this study. The weekly reflections were part of the practicum requirement. Each participant had to record their weekly reflections in their teaching portfolio. The weekly reflections can encompass issues related to their concerns in teaching, student management, interpersonal relationships with the staff and school administrators as well as personal matters that could impact their performance in school.

Both the data gathered from the questionnaires and reflections were analyzed by identifying emerging themes. These themes were further reviewed and coded. The coded themes were validated to identify if they provide accurate representation of participants' experiences. In brief, the data collection and analysis procedure are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Data collection and data analysis procedure

Phase/stage	Activity	Instruments	Mode of analysis
Pre- practicum (5 day briefing session)	• Questionnaire given to participants	Qualitative questionnaire	Themes/constructs
Mid practicum (5 day briefing session)	• Questionnaire given to participants	Qualitative questionnaire	Themes/constructs
Post Practicum (5 day briefing session)	• Weekly reflections (Week one till twelve)	Weekly reflections	Themes/constructs

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in order of the three research questions.

What are the student teachers concerns during the practicum stint?

Pre-practicum phase

The following illustrates the data gathered from the questionnaire which details the concerns in preparation, teaching and evaluation in the pre-practicum phase. The initial concerns generally can be categorized into three main categories; preparation towards practicum, teaching in the classroom and evaluation by the cooperating teachers and supervisors.

The first area of concerns revolved around the preparation before the actual teaching. The participants were concerned with their own ability in teaching. One participant commented on her *ability to teach the students effectively* and *always think about the best way to teach the students*. There were a few participants who were concerned with their own teaching skills and feared that their students would not understand what was being taught. Few participants also compared their teaching ability with their colleagues. They based this on their academic performance in the teacher training institute as compared with their peers. These participants who did not perform well perceived themselves as *inferior* compared to their friends who scored better grades.

In addition, the participants also expressed concern over their involvement in co-curricular activities in the assigned schools. Most of them were anxious over the teaching workload and their ability to manage the workload well.

Some participants also focused on relationships with the teachers in the school. They were worried that they would not be able to meet the expectations of the teachers and the school as a whole. The next concern was based on the teaching task itself. In the teaching task, classroom management matters were one of the main concerns presented. For most participants, they found voice projection as a common cause for concern. They were worried about not being able to *throw their voice* for students to hear their instructions.

The participants were anxious about the writing of lesson plans and making sure the appropriate content and activities were included in the lesson. One participant claimed that despite being exposed to many ways of preparing lesson plans, she found it difficult to align the content of the lesson to suitable activities. This participant was also troubled with meeting

the objectives of the lesson and was not sure if the activities were in line with the objectives of the lesson.

Another concern identified was the students in the class. Most participants were worried with ways to manage their students and to get them interested in the lessons. Among the reasons for these concerns was big class size. The participants lamented the fact that they might not be able to control the students and things might get worst with having mixed ability students in one classroom. One participant claimed that *those with average proficiency* were the ones who *made the most noise in class and never listen to instructions*. Therefore, it would be difficult for a teacher to plan the appropriate activities and to control the students at the same time.

The third concern was related to the evaluation by cooperating teachers and supervisors. In this practicum programme, participants were evaluated by both cooperating teachers and supervisors. During the first four weeks of the practicum, cooperating teachers and supervisors provided formative comments to guide and scaffold the participants. In the second phase of the practicum which was over the subsequent eight weeks, the participants were observed and evaluated by the cooperating teachers and supervisors. This time around the evaluation was based on a PASS or FAIL grade. Hence the aspect of evaluation was of high concern to the participants. The data derived from the written comments of the participants revealed that the student teachers were concerned in two areas with regards to supervision and evaluation of cooperating teachers and supervisors.

First, the participants were anxious about the teaching beliefs and expectations of the supervisors and cooperating teachers that were assigned to them. For example, they worried that the supervisors and cooperating teachers expected them to *follow his/her ways, being strict and rigid and having different schools of thoughts and opinions*. These participants further elaborated on their anxiety in terms of supervisors and cooperating teachers providing feedback on their teaching. They felt that critical remarks can mar their enthusiasm in teaching. This led to the next area of apprehension which was their relationship with the supervisors and cooperating teachers. The issues were related to the personality of the supervisors and cooperating teachers. They worried that the supervisors or cooperating teachers would not be *friendly* and regard *the job of supervision as a burden*. Hence, the second area of concern was the challenging task of building good rapport with the supervisors and cooperating teachers.

Mid practicum phase

As stated previously, the mid practicum briefing was conducted after the first phase of practicum which lasted for four weeks. This mid practicum briefing session required the participants to attend a five day briefing in which various issues pertaining to practicum were addressed. In one of the sessions, participants were required to complete a questionnaire in which they recorded their practicum experiences.

The findings from the questionnaire indicated participants' anxiety in the following aspects: classroom management (including student management), actual teaching (pertaining to time management and lesson planning) and rapport with school staff (teachers).

Classroom management, in particular, student management was a pivotal issue for most participants. Managing the classroom is seen as a major issue in most studies carried out on student teachers during practicum (see Goh & Mathews, 2011). For these participants, classroom management involved the ability to keep the students attentive and on task as well

as making sure that the student – teacher rapport was maintained. Many participants faced problems dealing with their students. For example, one participant mentioned that she had problems dealing with the lower primary students (Years One and Two). She found that most of the time, the students refused to follow her instructions. However the participant reflected on this issue and realized what went wrong.

It occurred mainly because I used high level of English and does not cater to their level. Other than that, I found that I tend to use individual work rather than pair or group work... I have done group work couple of times and the result end up with chaotic classroom.

The reflection indicated the awareness of the participant of her own weaknesses and she was able to identify the solution to the problem at hand when she added later that *the lesson I learnt was that avoiding them to sit within their closest friend. I should separate them.* Another participant lamented on her students' misbehavior.

Although I believe most of the time I managed to control the class, there are few moments that I doubt my students are listening to me. They may have their eyes on me, but no one knows what's running in their minds. I wish I have better skills to get them to really pay attention and learn something from me.

This participant wanted her learners to be engaged in the learning process and to participate in a meaningful learning environment. The doubts shown indicated that the participant was reflecting on her practice and was looking out to see if she could improve the teaching – learning environment. Another participant who faced a noisy class had this to say.

My students were active and constantly making noise when they were already comfortable with my presence in their classroom. They ignored my instruction and at one point of time, I had to use Malay language in order to keep them quiet. Perhaps I was not strict with them and I should reinforce/repeat my rules every time before I begin my lesson.

Again this participant reflected on her practice and considered suitable strategies to overcome her problem in managing the students.

However there were participants who were inclined to bypass these issues and move on with their teaching. For instance, one participant stated that she was warned by other teachers that the students of her class were *difficult to control*. She lamented the fact that the students *are definitely not shy to make noise and disruption during class which I'm beginning to ignore now*. This participant was aware of the fact that she had a loud voice which did help in controlling the class to a certain extent. However, she felt that she was not doing a good job and resorted to *send their names to the student's affair department for multiple offences*. This participant felt that the administrators or the school management would be able to provide support for her problems with classroom management.

The issue of teacher – learner rapport also plays an important role in establishing a conducive climate for teaching and learning. For example, one participant experienced problems in gaining respect from her students.

Being a new English teacher in the school, I have trouble in presenting myself as their new teacher. Students see me more as their friends. I have a hard time in managing their behaviours when they are in my lesson. They do not respect me as their teacher and always seem to want to have a chat with me rather than learning in my lessons. When I tried to treat them with punishment, they did not take me seriously and their misconducts continue to prevail. And it is nothing I could do as the school does not allow physical punishments upon its students.

This participant seemed to want to establish a formal relationship with her students. The manner in which this participant had presented herself to her students had created a conflict in terms of how the students viewed her. There was conflict between the participant's perception of a teacher and the students' view of a teacher. Surprisingly, in this case, the students wanted to regard their teacher as their *friend* by chatting. This participant was uncomfortable with this form of rapport as she regarded this as a mark of disrespect. During the initial teaching stint, instability may occur in terms of teacher role and rapport with students. Eventually as the teacher gets more confident and comfortable with the teaching scenario, the situation is defined and both teacher and students will be able to play their roles accordingly.

The next area of anxiety for these participants was on lesson planning. Here, the participants identified lesson planning a perplexing affair as stated by one participant.

I expected them to be fully engaged with my lesson and I tried my best to conduct a fun and interesting lesson. As such, students were reluctant to participate in every activity that I planned during the first two weeks. They were also demanding for more challenging activities, thus reduced the effectiveness of my lesson.

Inability to generate a lesson plan with appropriate objectives to meet the needs of the class was another issue raised by the participants.

Sometimes, I tend to be ambitious and it leads me not to be able to finish my lesson. I was also still having to improve writing my lesson objectives as they need to be specific and clear.

The above participants regarded lesson planning as a crucial element in ensuring the effectiveness of their teaching. Both the participants had high expectations in the ability to design and implement lessons successfully almost instantaneously. In contrast, one participant had a totally different view of lesson plans.

Sometimes we didn't even conduct the lesson plan, how do they know that the lesson plan wouldn't work. Besides, that is what we are about to learn as a teacher. In my opinion, the practicum is not solely about lesson plan; it's about how the student teacher conducts the lesson and handles the class. ... And one more thing, do not expect the lesson plan can be executed according to the lesson plan.

This participant felt that the lesson plan was subjected to changes in the classroom situation. When the situation arose, this participant would most likely be able to make instructional and management decisions on the spot.

How helpful were the supervisors and cooperating teachers in providing support and guidance during the practicum stint?

Entering a school as a student teacher can be a daunting experience for most individuals. The first impression made by both parties (the school and the student teachers) on each other creates an impact which can influence the working relationship of the parties concerned. Student teachers, especially, experience more stress as they are entering a new environment filled with challenges. The school's ethos and the outlook of the existing staff become a point for contention to these young student teachers. As one participant mentioned;

I have had some difficulties in building a good rapport with some teachers in the school, thus it's quite bothering me. To be honest, they seemed to have this culture of "senior-junior-trainee teachers" relationships.

The disparity between student teachers and teachers in the schools began when there was a discrimination based on seniority. Experienced teachers often disregard the young beginner teacher due to their lack of teaching experience. Ideas by these student teachers are sometimes given lukewarm responses. Ideally one should consider both ends of the continuum. At one end, we have the experienced teachers with years of tried and tested teaching methodologies. At the other end, we have student teachers brimming with new and innovative ideas yet to be tried out. The conflict occurs when the experienced teachers are not ready to move from the safe zone, that is the tried and tested zone to the uncertain domain as stated by the following participant.

We tried to volunteer in the school activities, yet they did not seem to be bothered about our contribution to the school. Maybe ours is not that important and we did not do any remarkable contribution.

Young student teachers are starting their career on a fresh path, paved by their theoretical base and limited teaching experiences. Their perceptions of teaching as a whole are exploratory in nature. When both the experienced teacher and student teacher meet, they need to be able to find ways in optimizing their potentials by seeking out possibilities in enhancing the existing tried and tested teaching methodologies. New ideas from the young student teachers may invigorate the mundane teaching strategies and approaches. At the same time the ideas on teaching strategies by experienced teachers should be considered. Therefore it is crucial that the student teachers interact and collaborate with the experienced teachers. However, not all schools promote such collaboration. For example, one participant described her working environment as indicated below.

We had been given a room and we had been in that room. Although we enjoyed the room so much, we finally realized that this is going to be a problem. We have had limited time to mingle with other teachers, and we have limited access to talk to other teachers in the staff room. Sometimes, we hear other teachers talk bad about us, behind our back...Some of them pretended that we never existed in that school, some of them did not reply our greetings if we passed by any of them. We have tried to get into 'the teachers' club' but we were never acknowledged by them. This is so hard as it does affect our days.

In general, participants of this study found both the supervisors and cooperating teachers helpful in providing guidance and support. As one participant aptly described;

She always go through the lesson plans first before the observations and corrected the mistakes. Thus, she is also very understanding during the observations by placing herself in my shoes on how difficult it is to handle students who are naughty and of different abilities.

Another participant expressed her gratitude towards her cooperating teacher for the helped rendered.

...lend her resources books so that I can improve my teaching, especially with the activities that can be carried out in the classroom. All in all, I am thankful to have such a nice, caring and motherly but strict supervisor to guide me through this challenging phase in my study.

Positive feedback was also given by the participants regarding their supervisors. For example, one participant commented on her supervisor's sensitivity towards her predicament as an inexperienced teacher when she said;

He is also very understanding about the usual problem that I think every new teacher faces and is very realistic about his expectations. He is also very careful when commenting on weaknesses that I felt is very important as not to cause too much frustration in my part.

On the other hand, there were participants who faced problems with their supervisors or cooperating teachers. One of the grouses recorded in the questionnaire is the supervisors' rigidity as mentioned by one participant below.

I think that she should allow the lesson to be carried out first and comment after that. Sometimes, words cannot accurately describe my intentions of teaching and learning. Maybe she should allow for some flexibility. After all, lesson plan is just a plan. Overall, she is good but try not to be so rigid.

There were also issues dealing with the time spent with their cooperating teachers in schools. A few participants claimed that they were not able to meet their cooperating teachers every day since the teachers were quite often busy with other tasks assigned by the school.

I do not have much contact with the cooperating teacher because she is a very busy person. However, she did provide with essential materials like work book and scheme of work.

A few cooperating teachers were seen to be given additional tasks by the school administrators since their classes were taken by student teachers. A similar issue was also addressed in other studies such as Taghreed and Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad (2017). What the schools have failed to realize was the need for these cooperating teachers to be with the student teachers throughout the practicum stint. Hence, these teachers were *always busy doing paper works*. On the other hand, there were also a few cooperating teachers who did

not view practicum as an important phase for student teachers. This was lamented by one participant as shown below.

She also didn't take observation seriously as she only observe me once and didn't want to write reports (just giving verbal comments). She should be more aware of what she needed to do (complete her observation).

How useful were the learnt pedagogical skills during the course in managing practicum?

Based on the data analysis, some of the participants agreed that the learnt pedagogical skills during the course had helped them tremendously during practicum. One participant claimed that she *was able to use some of the strategies, approaches, and theories taught*. However, she pointed out that *it was quite hard to put the theories into practice*.

Most participants found the practicum period was the time where they could explore what they have learnt and apply them in the authentic ESL classroom. One participant shared this about her view on practicum.

Yes. I think during the practicum, it is the best time for me to try and experiment all of the strategies and theories learnt during TESL Year 1 to 4. It is a good time for us to learn which strategies work best in different situation/environment.

However, a few participants claimed they were forced by their supervisors/cooperating teachers to apply certain theories/strategies which they think would not work in their classroom.

It is not easy to carry out what I learn because the situation sometimes did not allow me to use the theories. I was quite sad when my lecturer insist me on using the theories when I know it might not work. But, I will try my best to use what I have been taught.

According to Ong et al. (2004), this form of pressure will prevent student teachers from engaging positively in theory and practice. This finding also concurs with the findings in Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008) where the participants despite having some dissatisfaction with their mentor teachers' practices chose to follow the mentors' directions to avoid possible clashes with them.

Overall, all participants claimed the theories/strategies that they have learnt had either worked or did not work in their ESL classrooms. For example, a few participants said that some of the theories/strategies learnt did not work in their classrooms and they had to find other ways to overcome the problems at hand.

I manage to carry out the IRE (initiate-response evaluation) during my lesson and it worked to certain extend. However, when too much praise being used, students will not be impressed or happy to get the praise.

Sometimes the classroom management theories that we learned before fail to work in my classroom. Be it the 'killer stare', 'hand-clapping', or any other methods, the real situation seem to just get worst beyond my imagination.

One crucial element that added success and effectiveness to the aspect of linking theory to practice in a student teacher's practicum stint was the support from cooperating teachers and supervisors (lecturers). As one participant explained; *I've tried group work and pair work in some lessons... managed to make it success due to my cooperating teacher and supervisor's comments and suggestions.* Another participant described her cooperating teacher as *isn't fussy...she's always open to any ideas that I have. She has also contributed a lot of ideas for my planning.* The findings of this study have indicated that cooperating teachers in general play a major role in helping / scaffolding these student teachers to apply what they have learnt (theoretical knowledge) in the classroom (practical knowledge). Student teachers regarded cooperating teachers as their mentor and guide in the schools. They needed the support from these teachers to enable them to acclimatize to the classroom environment. As one participant illustrated;

I tend to follow and ask my cooperating teacher the best way to approach my students and rely on additional books that I bought as my guideline in dealing with them.

Discussion

Based on the findings above, student teachers face a specific pattern of experience during the practicum stint. This is elaborated in Figure 2.

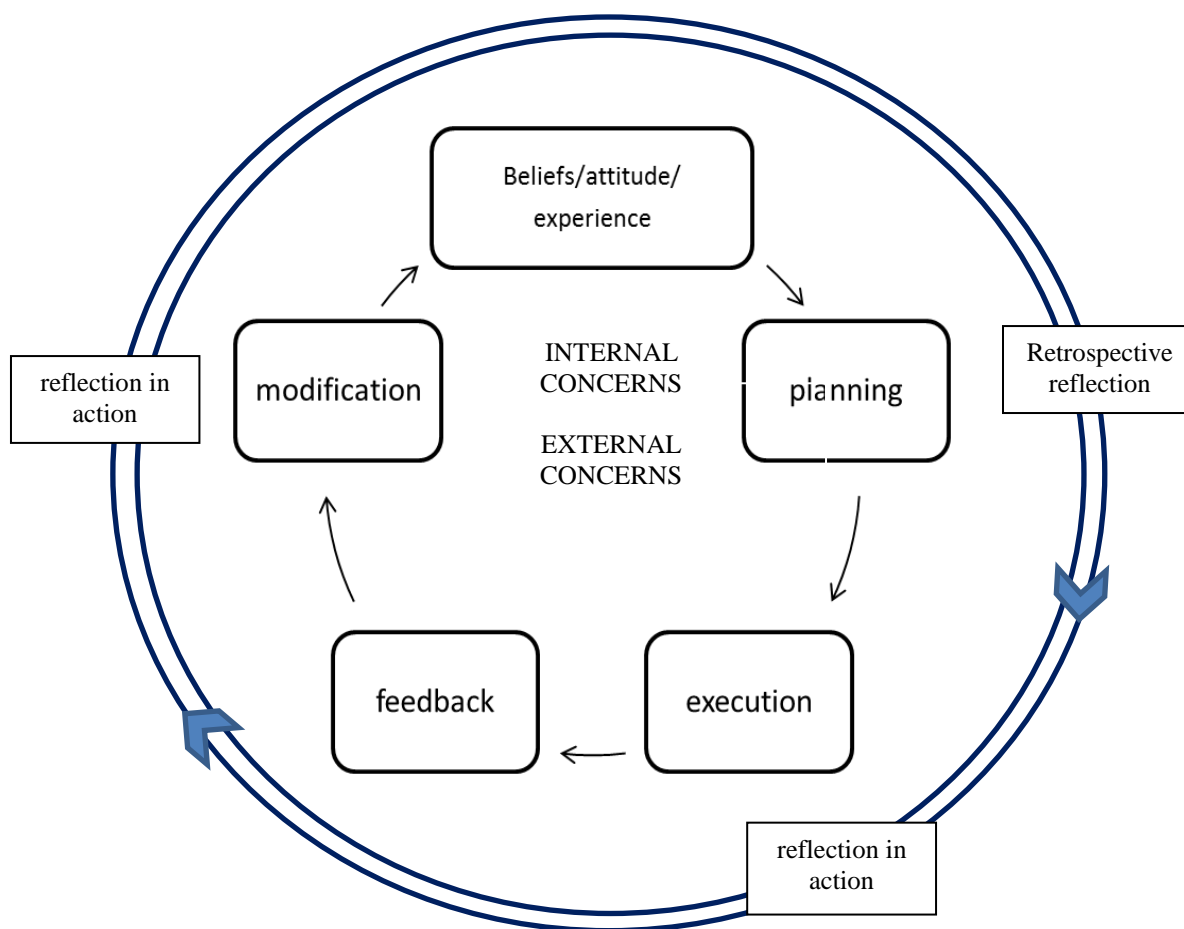


Figure 2: The practicum process

The participants' concerns at the beginning of the practicum stint mainly focus on their internal and external concerns. These concerns are very much influenced by their own perceptions on what a classroom entails and their own experiences as a student when they were young. These perceptions and experiences of the classroom are formed as teacher beliefs and impact their attitude towards teaching.

Using their beliefs and experiences as a basis, these participants attempt to link their theoretical knowledge gained from the training institutions to the classroom. In other words, their level of pedagogical knowledge is assessed when planning and executing their lessons. This is the stage where they seek to apply 'practical knowledge' based on what they have learnt in the institution and put it to test. Their planning of the lesson is also based on their retrospective experiences as learners in their school days as well as experiences accumulated throughout their exposure to school visits during their course of study. These retrospective experiences are rich in nature as these experiences present a good source in which they would be able to observe a wide range of teaching styles and techniques.

The next stage is the execution stage where the lesson is carried out and 'reflection in action' allows the participants to make changes/modify as they go on teaching. This stage highlights the ability of the participants' capacity to extemporize in the classroom. The participant may not be made aware that he/she is actually thinking/ reflecting on the job. One of the ways to capture their reflection in action is through their written reflections in which the participants have articulated their thoughts and their trouble shooting strategies.

In addition to the insights gained while conducting the class, the valuable feedback provided by the supervisors and cooperating teacher after the lesson, add on to their learning where they begin to identify their own strengths and weaknesses leading them to make necessary changes to their method of teaching. This will have great impact on their beliefs about teaching and being a teacher.

Recommendations

In addressing student teachers' concerns, certain steps can be taken to ensure the success of the practicum session and enable them to gain maximum benefits from it. As seen in the concerns based framework, the student teachers faced three varying aspects of concerns ranging from self-concern to impact concerns. The internal and external dimensions of these concerns must be dealt holistically as the concerns impact each other and subsequently influence the teacher's perceptions and beliefs about teaching.

As self-concerns is more individual based, student teachers must be given adequate support to build their confidence and competence in teaching. First, more exposure should be given to student teachers to enhance their practical skills before the final practicum session. They will then gain more confidence in managing the students and the classroom. The course components in the training institutions must contain elements that integrate practical and theoretical knowledge to enable the trainees to become effective practitioners.

The school administrators should ensure a conducive environment for student teachers throughout the practicum session. This includes providing a space in the staffroom with other teaching staff and allowing them to use the facilities available in the school. Making student teachers as part of the school instills in them a sense of belonging and of being needed.

Student teacher task concerns often revolve around designing and implementing lesson plans. As Bhargava (2009) suggests, the lesson plan should be flexible for student teachers. Supervisors and cooperating teachers should not impose their beliefs on the student teachers but instead allow them to explore and discover for themselves the best practice through trial and error.

In terms of overcoming task concerns, student teachers should be guided by supervisors and cooperating teachers in taking baby steps towards becoming professional teachers. Peer teaching between student teachers and supervisors/cooperating teachers should be encouraged during the initial stage of the practicum experience. This will increase opportunities for learning besides instilling confidence among student teachers and gaining students' trust.

Student teachers need to be engaged in practices that nurture and promote professional growth. Vacilotto and Cummings (2007) suggest that student teachers experiment with their own methods, approaches and techniques in the classroom. They should be allowed to share their professional experiences, doubts, insecurities, successes and failures with other teaching staff. Realization of one's own flaws will lead to new ways of solving problems.

The practicum stint is certainly an avenue in which student teachers are able to experience real life teaching like any other typical teacher. Awareness of the challenges during practicum and dealing with these challenges will prepare them in facing these challenges with confidence instead of giving up completely. Hence the practicum programme is indeed an important and instrumental stage in which the student teacher embarks on the initial journey towards becoming an experienced and competent teacher. As such much thought should be put into making the practicum stint a meaningful and effective learning experience for these student teachers.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the student teachers' practicum experiences in local schools in the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor region. The experiences and knowledge recorded would help raise awareness among student teachers, trainers and officers in the Ministry of Education in general.

For student teachers, from the findings of the study will help them to 'see' themselves as future beginner teachers, enhance their readiness level in facing teaching and the classroom as well as prepare them to become reflective practitioners. This study prepares the platform for these inexperienced student teachers to revisit their perceptions of what constitutes being a teacher practicing in the classroom.

This study also has insights for teacher trainers. As mentors, supervisors and cooperating teachers alike should realize the significance and impact of their teaching beliefs and practices on their student teachers. Supervisors and cooperating teachers' contributions in terms of ideas, comments and support could form the student teachers' own teaching beliefs. The concerns raised by the student teachers during the practicum should be considered by curriculum planners or program managers to design an enriching practicum stint in schools.

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