

## *Teaching Practicum: Student Teachers' Perspectives*

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### **Abstract**

Teaching practicum is a central component in any teacher education program regardless of the level of the program. It is also a time for student teachers to experiment with the knowledge obtained and put it into practice. Since this is their first real attempt in teaching, thus, problems are expected to arise as teaching is a very complex undertaking. Therefore, this study was conducted in our effort to understand what the student teachers went through during this short 12-week placement in school. It was also carried out to get insights into the way they dealt with the problems mentioned as well as into the suggestions given to the university as to further improve the program in the future. This study employed in depth interview with two informants who were chosen based on convenience sampling method as a way of gathering information. The informants were diploma in TESL students from a public university in Malaysia who had just completed their three month long teaching practicum. The findings indicated that the student teachers faced various challenges ranging from interpersonal to pedagogical issues. Suggestions and implications from the study were also discussed.

**Keywords:** teaching practicum, challenges, English as a second language

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Teachers have become the main focus of much research in education as there is evidence suggesting that teacher factor as one of the most influential factors in the success of any educational institutions. This is because the quality of instructions depends on the quality of teachers the institution possesses and this has a direct impact on students' learning and achievement in school. In fact, under the Education Development Plan 2006 – 2010, the Ministry of Education has made it clear that one of its policies is to “elevate the teaching profession by increasing the quality of teaching, advancing teaching as a career and improve the welfare of teachers.” (p.106).

In Malaysia, two bodies, the Ministry of Education and public universities are given the responsibilities of training students to become prospective teachers. Teacher education department (TED) is responsible in handling the program for the Ministry of Education while in universities, it is offered by the Faculty of Education.

#### **The teaching practicum**

The teaching practicum in University A (the university in the study) takes place during the fifth semester and lasts 12 weeks. Prior to the teaching practicum, students are exposed to Microteaching class whereby they are given the opportunity to conduct mock lessons with their classmates who act as students. During the teaching practicum, students are placed in groups of three in primary schools located around the university campus. Each group will be assigned a

university supervisor and cooperating teachers from the school nominated. Before the commencement of their teaching practicum, students are required to attend a week long school based orientation (PBS) to familiarize themselves with the school environment by observing teachers in class, socializing with the staff and so on. The students undertaking the teaching practicum experience are supposed to achieve certain objectives like to prepare lessons for use in the classroom and also to demonstrate an ability to conduct a lesson according to their lesson plan.

The university does not have any control on the number of classes and also the level of students the student teachers are given. It is left to the discretion of the school administration to decide. However, by the end of the practicum stint, student teachers will be evaluated by both their university supervisor and cooperating teachers although the weight given to the two supervisors is different.

### **Statement of the problem**

In Malaysia, teaching is considered one of the high stress occupations, being number 4 on the list (Berita Harian Online, 2012). Therefore, a lot needs to be done to make the first few years of teaching enjoyable and less frustrating as studies have indicated that the first few years of teaching as the most critical period. One of the ways is by focusing on the teaching practicum that student teachers have to undergo during their teaching development program. Crookes (2003) highlighted the fact that although the practicum is seen as a core course in most TESOL teacher education programs, it has not been given as much attention as it should have in terms of orientation, content and practice. In fact, very little is known about what students go through during their placement in schools.

As many have suggested (for example, Kyriacou & Stephen, 1999) teaching practicum is the most stressful component in teaching as for majority of the student teachers, it is their first formal attempt at teaching. It is through the process of teaching a class of second language learners, and receiving feedback that the student teacher has a chance to apply knowledge and skills gained elsewhere or to develop strategies for handling the different dimensions of a language lesson (Richard and Nunan, 1990). The experience during the practicum can be “nerve wrecking”. It is also one of the biggest influences of the teacher education course in terms of teacher development (Farrell, 2008) as most of the time, the decision to either continue teaching or not depends heavily on how successful their teaching practicum is.

Much research has been conducted to investigate ways to make student teaching practicum a more enjoyable and worthwhile experience, most of them are from the perspectives of students doing a degree or even master in education. Little is known about the teaching practicum that is undergone by students who are at a different education level like diploma. Unlike degree or master students, diploma students’ content knowledge may not be as advanced as others. This is simply because the duration of their studies is shorter, thus preventing them from obtaining as much knowledge and experience as they should. Furthermore, these students are younger and “less matured” thus contributing to other problems like effectiveness and ability to relate to others who are much more senior in school.

The information is especially important for the university as sometimes the institutions are not aware of what is happening in school. Therefore, a study should be done to understand the young student teachers' experience teaching formally for the first time. Thus, the study is undertaken to investigate problems and challenges encountered during the practicum.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Teaching practicum is the time for students who are learning to become teachers to experiment with the different things they learn in school. Various studies have admitted the importance of the practicum in teacher education program. As suggested by Schulman (nd), certain knowledge is necessary for a student teacher to become effective teacher later. Besides content knowledge, teachers are also required not only pedagogical knowledge but also pedagogical content knowledge.

Shulman (as cited in Tuli and File, 2009) further elaborated that teaching is a “combination of an art, a craft and a science. Knowing what to teach, how to teach it and what methods to use with particular topics, particular kinds of students and in particular settings all combine to form the knowledge and skills that define teaching expertise” (p.110). All of these knowledge is important for teachers especially teachers to be to develop.

Putnam (1996) stressed the importance of teaching practicum as he believed that learning process needs to be grounded in classroom practice. Nevertheless not all learning to teach process can be generalized to all situations, across the board. For this, Calderhead and Shorrock (cited in George and Worrell, 2002) identified three specific contexts that provide different experience to the student teachers. Among them are; the fact that learning to teach is person specific in which novice and practicing teachers bring different experience with them to the learning process and the other one is called context specific. In this case, the different contexts the student teachers are in will generally produce different experience, perhaps because of the influence from the cooperating teacher, university supervisor and others surrounding them.

### **Teaching practicum and its roles in teacher education program**

In many teacher education programs, teaching practicum is a compulsory course to be taken by all the students as it an important part of teacher's professional development (Richard & Crookes, 1988) although the nature, length and frequency of the practicum varies from one institution to another. As this is a central and most important component of teacher education, a lot of time and attention needs to be spent and given to ensure that student teachers undergoing the course are well prepared physically and mentally. This is because the experience gained from the field is very crucial and valuable in the learning process and in developing the understanding regarding the profession. Furthermore, the quality of teaching practicum depends very much on the quality of the experience gained during teaching practicum.

For that, most teacher education programs design their teaching practicum course in such a way as to give the student teachers as much exposure to the real teaching world as they can. Richard and Crookes (1988), in their study have identified eight most frequently cited objectives of teaching practicum. One of them is to provide practical experience in classroom teaching.

Although the objectives are similar, the implementation of the teaching practicum differs from country to country or even within the same country. According to Bloomfield, Taylor and Maxwell (2004), in Australia, the normal practice is that student teachers are gradually introduced to the experience. Student teachers initially just observe expert teachers conducting the lessons, followed by small group teaching. Once they have gained enough confidence, then they will be given the whole class to handle under the supervision of the cooperating teachers. Most of the time, they carried out co teaching role with their cooperating teachers. This is how they develop initial competency.

However, the practice is slightly different in University A as the transition for student teachers is not as gradual. Although they are given one week, known as PBS week, for orientation whereby they are supposed to observe expert teachers and get acquainted with the school environment, they are entrusted with full teaching responsibilities right after that. The cooperating teachers will only come and observe them once in a while to give feedback. The rest of the time, they are left on their own in the class.

#### Challenges and obstacles faced

Since teaching practicum is the time when student teachers practically have the opportunity to experiment with their knowledge outside their classroom for the first time, a lot of challenges are expected to arise. This is because learning to teach is a very complex activity as there are so many “unexpected and unknowns”. Research (e.g. Kyraicos & Stephen, 1999) has suggested the need to pay attention to those concerns and challenges for future development in teacher education. If the challenges are not taken care of, they could aggravate more problems to the already complicated teaching activity.

In Malaysian context, quite a number of studies have been conducted to understand the plight of student teachers. Ong et. al (2004), for example, noted that pressures faced during the practicum had actually “prevented the students from positively engaging in theory and practice” (p.3). Their study identified problems ranging from supervision to heavy non teaching workloads. A more recent study by Goh and Matthew (2011), employing reflective journal writing, identified four different types of concerns which include classroom management and student discipline, institutional and personal adjustments, classroom teaching and student learning. Their study involved students pursuing their teaching career in Science at a bachelor level. Tan (2008) who studied challenges faced by English language teachers discovered a few areas of concerns which include establishing good rapport, getting support from teacher/ lecturer mentor, putting theories into practice and importance of classroom management.

#### **Supports from cooperating teachers**

Student teachers who undergo teaching practicum require a lot of support especially in skills in teaching and the emotional support (Farrell, 2001, Arnold, 2006). They rely on various sources for guidance, one of which is from their cooperating teachers. According to Farrell (2008), one of the most influential people to the student teachers during their teaching practicum is the cooperating teachers as they are the people who spend more time with the students in school. Indeed, Ngoh and Tan (2000) who conducted a study on 90 beginning primary school teachers

also found that those teachers wanted support and cooperation from other experienced teachers the most.

The support is needed since working with cooperating teachers gives student teachers opportunity to develop their teaching skills because the cooperating teachers provide models to be observed and/ or emulated. Their influence ranges from attitudes to classroom practices (Zahorik, 1988). Other important roles of cooperating teachers include providing immediate feedback regarding their teaching through lesson observation and discussion. Guidance from cooperating teachers is very much needed, therefore, lack of it can pose problems to the student teachers. As Md Yunus et.al,(2010) found in their study, their informants encountered problems with both their supervisors and cooperating teachers because they were not able to communicate with both of them due to busyness. This happens because most teachers become cooperating teachers out of compulsion (Ngoh and Tan, 2000) and they are not trained to do the job.

Although reflective thinking can be assessed using different methods, most of the studies conducted in this area (Goh and Matthew ,2011; Tan, 2008)employed reflective journals to gauge student teachers' experience while others used open ended questionnaire (MdYunus, 2010). Very few studies have been conducted using a different approach like interviews. Seidman (1998) stated that in depth interview provides researchers opportunity to comprehend the experience an individual goes through and the meaning they relate to in that particular event. Therefore, there is a need for a study to be done employing interviews as the means of collecting data as the data obtained may be different if other approaches are taken.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

The sampling method used in this study is convenience sampling, whereby the informants were chosen on the basis of availability at the time of the interview. Although this is not the best sampling procedure for a qualitative study, convenience sampling was employed as there were a few constraints faced by the researcher. At the time of the study, all the students who had undergone their teaching practicum were on a 6 week- school holiday, making it difficult for the researcher to get hold of the prospective informants. So, the researcher had to make do with the informants available at the time of the study. As this study was based on convenience sampling, the data obtained may not be as "thick" as it would have otherwise been if purposive sampling had been chosen.

In this study, two female students who have just completed their teaching practicum were selected. The selection was made on the basis of their availability at the time of the study. Both of them were interviewed for the purpose of obtaining their perspectives on the experience. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 ½ hours and they were audio taped and later transcribed.

### **4. FINDINGS**

Research question: What are the student teachers' concerns and challenges during the teaching practicum period?

Based on the data gathered, there are a number of problems faced by the informants during their practicum stint which are grouped into several themes. One of the themes is the interpersonal relationship with others in school like teachers, school administrators and even the head master. For this theme, there are three subthemes that emerged from it which were categorized as school teachers' attitude, relationship with the school staff and communication problem with the school staff.

It was evident that another most common problem faced by the student teachers is the lack of pedagogical skills. This problem resulted from their inability to apply the theory learnt into practice. Problems like this normally happen in lower group or even in mixed ability class.

*I was not very good at that time, because I was teaching the the lower class, the lower class always make noise and I can't control them (informant 1/ DU38)*

For the theme on professionalism, there are two further sub categories. One is on our practical teachers' lack of work ethics while the other is to do with the existing school teachers' lack of professionalism. The student teachers were not aware of teaching ethics like refraining from physically punish the children. Below is a quotation as an example.

*And also they know that Practical teachers cannot scold them and cannot ... (making body language- slapping)... But I saw the teacher like... I ask the kids, what did their teacher, their previous teachers do them when they make noise, don't respect them, they hit them.(informant 1/DU 103,109).*

One interesting theme that was derived is conflict. As it occurred a number of times, therefore it deserved to be a category on its own. The conflict arises from a number of sources like the difference in the practice and reality, the advice given by the university supervisor and the school teacher, conflict between their expectation and reality and also between the policy and practice. *When we start teaching them in English, then they will say, 'no, you have to mix with bahasa'. But our supervisor didn't allow us to do that. He said that "don't you spoil them with Bahasa" (informant 2/ DU 101).*

Lack of professional support is seen as a concern for these informants as they would expect others surrounding them mainly their cooperating teachers to provide the needed support especially when it comes to solving classroom problems. They mentioned that their cooperating teachers were never available for them, mostly because they were busy. Therefore, they were not able to learn much from their cooperating teachers and did not gain much from the whole teaching practicum experience. The followings are some examples that fall under this category:

*... she's always like she's busy, it's hard for me to like confront her and ask her what is this, what is that because she's always not in the room, she said...she's always got class. It's hard for me and sometimes she's not at school, because she's, she's already old, she always has high blood pressure (informant 1/ DU 26)*

Some teachers did provide them with some supports but the student teachers were not convinced with their responses as these responses were not seen practical. What they needed was something concrete so that they could apply that in their class.

*Sometimes they just give like this, “ooooooo they are just kids, they’ll learn. One day they will learn. But I was thinking about my result, I have to teach them. I don’t just say, “oooo they are kids. ”I can’t say they are kids. I can’t say that. I have to teach them. ” (informant 1/ DU 46).*

However, some of the problems they faced are due to their own personality. Since both of them are still young, (therefore lack maturity and experience), the way they carry themselves (behavior wise and fashion wise) is not seen appropriate by the teachers at the school who are much more seniors than them. So, this has caused problems between them and the teachers. The school children’s attitude toward the practicum teachers also was a cause of problems to them.

### **Summary of findings**

As expected, teaching practicum is the most stressful time in the student teachers’ life in teacher education program. The informants mentioned a long list of problems they faced ranging from lack of support from teachers to pedagogical skills to interpersonal skills. However, the most frequently cited problem is related to their relation with others like cooperating teachers, administrative staff, or even school teachers in general. This comes out as no surprise because interpersonal development has never been highlighted in any of the university courses. All this while, the focus of the university is only on the development of their pedagogical aspect as that is the core of teaching. So, the program only emphasizes on how to teach well rather than how to work well. There is no doubt that, an effective teacher is one who not only knows how to teach but also how to relate to others since teaching is not only confined to classroom but it also involves the whole school community. The fact that cooperating teachers were not available for them is very unfortunate because these student teachers were there to learn but if nobody was there to guide them, then it defeats the whole purpose of the practicum.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the experiences the student teachers had, was not a very pleasant one as they encountered a lot challenges during their practicum .They were “caught offguard” in many instances. This shows that the students were not fully equipped with the right skills and knowledge in preparing them for the real world. On top of that they are mentally not ready to shoulder such a monumental responsibility. Because of their “unreadiness”, they have created a tense situation for themselves. So, there are still a lot that needs to be done by the university in making sure the students are better prepared for the practicum.

Having said that, I think the following points deserve mention:

Firstly, the teaching practicum has been quite an experience for the student teachers as it has given them the exposure to what teaching life is all about. These student teachers need special guidance and support from various parties to enhance their learning and make their experience less frustrating. However, as we can see in the previous chapter, that aspect is lacking in this

case. In many cases, the supports desperately needed are not available. Not all schools are very cooperative when it comes to providing student teachers from the university with the best learning environment. This is because, unlike teacher training college students, they were treated as second class citizens. Not only were they not taken seriously, but worse still they were seen as a nuisance to school. This finding concurred with a study which was done in high schools in Japan, by Sekiyama et.al. (cited in Sakamoto, 2002), whereby many schools did not welcome student teachers as the student teachers did not have enough knowledge in the subject taught. So, more often than not, after the student teachers have left, the school teachers have to re-teach their students. This has become an extra burden for the school teachers.

Another concern is the unavailability of cooperating teachers to help the student teachers in time of need. Obviously the cooperating teachers were not serious in providing guidance to the students. The finding from this has supported the one found earlier by Ngoh and Tan (2000) regarding roles of the cooperating teachers which were assigned by the school. Many of these teachers have no proper training to guide student teachers. The task of a cooperating is not as simple as it looks since 'mentoring is not a straightforward extension of being a school teacher' (Arnold 2006 p.117).

However, the blame should not entirely fall on the school. The student teachers are equally responsible for the cold treatment and also for the problem they created for themselves in causing the tensions with the school. Had they been more matured in their personality, they would not have had so many problems or at least would have been able to minimize the problems to a more tolerable level. Tan (2008) in his study discovered the importance of establishing good rapport with the people in school in getting warm welcome.

The university should also review its program from time to time as to ensure that it is relevant to and in line with current practices. Not only that, the lecturers involved in teaching the students have to update their knowledge in the field as the study has shown that some of the lessons the student teachers learnt in class cannot be applied in the real world.

### **Implications from the study**

The study has several implications that can be used to improve the teaching practicum program in the future. Problems encountered can be minimized if the following actions can be taken: The university should be more selective of the schools they send their students to. This is to ensure that students who undergo their teaching practicum will be able to make the most out of their practicum. Some schools are small in size therefore there are not many classes of students. The student teachers who do their teaching practicum at such schools will not have variety of experience as they will only be given 1 class to teach for the whole 12 weeks.

Secondly, as a way to solve interpersonal skills problem, students should also be given more courses on personal and interpersonal development so that they are socially equipped. As of now, these developmental aspects are neglected entirely from the program. Our program's only concern is to provide them with the best pedagogical knowledge as it is seen to be the priority. However, in the future, shaping students' personality should also be the target. Programs geared

towards that can be given in the form of workshops or short courses from time to time during their stay in the university.

### **Limitations of the study**

The findings from the study should be interpreted with cautions as there are several weaknesses that need mentioning. As this is a qualitative research which relied heavily on individual's perspectives, there is a tendency for biasness to occur in terms of the input obtained from the informants. Another limitation deals with the possibility of inaccurate information provided by them as this is a one sided account. Whatever was provided was considered accurate for the study. Lastly, the researcher, being part of the institution under study, may have unconsciously influence the findings and the interpretations of the study.

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